

Photo documentation of Berlin's urban gardens, free spaces and voids

It's difficult to imagine Berlin without its voids, free spaces and gardens. Time runs more slowly in these places – quite and peaceful spots where you can get away from the noise and bustle of the big city.

Last year, I started to take pictures in the urban garden “Prinzessinengarten,” a former wasteland at Moritzplatz, and on the Tempelhof Field. They are both very well maintained community gardens.

This year, when my sister moved to Spreefeld, a cooperative building project, I started to look around that area, and found some free spaces and wastelands with interesting alternative-living approaches, little gardens and cultural life, as well as plots of land with free access to the Spree riverbank. Some of this was still-empty wasteland from the area where the Wall used to be, its scars still visible. These places would be perfect for urban gardens and as free spaces open to all.

Another site is called “Teepee-Land,” a place at the Spree next to the Eisfabrik (ice factory), where people from the Curvy wasteland have moved, and set up teepees, a stage, some hang-out and workshops spaces. It is probably one of the places which won't be there very much longer. On the other side of the river is the Holzmarkt, where the owners of the closed Kater Holzig bar have recently started to build a new space for creativity, to live, work and party. They have persuaded a foundation to act as a partner in their cooperative, but they also invite everybody to help build it.

I also visited Lohmühle, an alternative living project already founded in 1991, which is probably one of the oldest Wagenburgen (alternative trailer camps) in Berlin. It is located on the former Death Strip, the 10 meter wide no-man's-land in front of the Berlin Wall. It's now a very idyllic, green and self sustaining place with solar panels on the wagons. They focus on community living in balance with nature.

It is this search for a community, a home, and nature that brings the Berliners and visitors to the urban gardens. They meet to talk, exchange thoughts and seeds, maintain the gardens or just relax and have fun. They try out new methods, develop new ideas, and also revive old traditions and share their knowledge with others. But this community life also demands responsibility, leads to discussions and arguments, and requires a willingness to cooperate with one another.

The gardens, shacks and tents and wagons at these places are mainly built of scrap wood and other free materials – that's what lends the gardens their charm of. They are wild and overgrown, but in all of them, there are signs that inform, explain, share and post opinions.

I also took photos of some of the wastelands and voids that still dot the city. The Berlin voids are well known world-wide. Most of them are scars from World War II. By the end of the war, Berlin's public authorities counted 363 air strikes. In both parts of the city, they reminded the inhabitants for decades of the war. Neither in the East nor in the West of the city were planners able to completely close these voids with new buildings. But now, with the new housing boom of the past ten years, not many are left. Most of the wastelands and free spaces are threatened by private or municipal real estate plans.

But there is a strong movement trying to mobilize citizens' voices to prevent real-estate plans. The best-known are the initiative "Spreeufer für alle" (the banks of the Spree for all) and the "Plebiscite against Building on the Tempelhof Field," which has now been successful, blocking the city government's development plan for the former airport. The Prinzessinengarten has prevented the planned privatization of their space with a public letter to the Berlin government, supported by 30,000

people in a crowdfunding campaign. They have now gotten another five-years contract to use the space for their garden.

They write on their website: Imagine a future where every available space in big cities is used to let new green spaces bloom. Green spaces that local residents create themselves, and use to produce fresh and healthy food. The result would be increased biological diversity, less CO₂, and a better micro-climate. The spaces would promote a sense of community and the exchange of a wide variety of skills and forms of knowledge, and would help people lead more sustainable lives. They would be a kind of miniature utopia, a place where a new style of urban living could emerge, and where people could work together, relax, communicate and enjoy locally produced vegetables.

With this in mind I plan to continue the documentation of these places, its fruits and changes in the next years.

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