

THE NEUKOELLN PHENOMENON: THE RECENT MOVE OF AN ART SCENE IN BERLIN

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Abstract. *One of the positive developments in post-Wall Berlin was the emergence of an alternative art scene, with Mitte and Prenzlauer Berg having a leading position in the early 1990s among artists as the new centres of Berlin's creative industries. Soon, Mitte and Prenzlauer Berg became places where highly commercial creative companies arrived, and for that reason the art scene moved to Kreuzberg-Friedrichshain after no longer being able to afford the increasing rents. Nowadays we are witnessing the move of the art scene to Neukoelln, one of Berlin's most problematic districts, with higher than average total migration, ethnic tensions, poor socio-demographic indicators and a high crime rate. The art scene in this district is not as established as it was in Mitte. What is happening there right now is not about profit, it is more about the idea that something is going on at the moment. Thus, it is too early for final conclusions. How does the arrival of an art scene influence Berlin's most problematic district and what is its possible future impact? For now, we have the redevelopment of Berlin's Neukoelln district which will ultimately lead toward gentrification. The result of such a change is rising rents and anger from the older more established residents.*

Key words: *Art direction, branding, Germany, public space, globalization, post-Wall Berlin, Neukoelln, creative industries, sub-cultural, creative cities*

1. INTRODUCTION

For many living in Berlin, the name of Neukoelln is the synonym for a working class district with high unemployment and social problems. For all the students, artists and hippies who have come to Berlin in the last few years the area is the synonym for an exciting, rebellious, hedonistic and energetic alternative culture and club scene area. Small-scale crafts and shops located together in different buildings are all around the area.

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Neukoelln is being transformed from a dangerous problematic area, Berlin's social trouble spot where immigrants clash in the streets, into a roaring bohemian district where new bars, galleries and studios are opening every week. This mix of influences and diversity presented here creates new forms of design. Until recently, ethnic tensions, poverty, drugs and raging violence with high crime rates were the only synonyms for Neukoelln. Today, the high concentration of different artistic and cultural communities in the area has changed its urban environment.

Berlin is known as a city with relatively little business and production, but with amazingly low rents, and Neukoelln is a district where rents are among the lowest. The Berlin 'art scene' left Mitte, Prenzlauer Berg and Kreuzberg-Friedrichshain (in 2003 these two city districts were merged into one) and arrived in Neukoelln, a move which seemed like a natural spill over effect as Neukoelln is adjacent to Kreuzberg-Friedrichshain. We are witnessing today that rapid changes are occurring in this peripheral problematic pocket of Berlin, since Neukoelln has now been discovered by the 'creative class' (Florida, 2002). The heart of this rich sub-cultural vibrant area is a street with one of the highest bar densities in Berlin, located in the north of Neukoelln, called Weserstraße. Numerous improvised galleries and studios have recently been opened there which have upgraded its club culture and music venues. Further to the north, located between Kreuzberg and Neukoelln, is Sanderstraße, also recently infected with this phenomenon of booming galleries and studios. There is a constant flow of people of diverse social and ethnic background, and a mix of rebellious characters with a hedonistic lifestyle.

People want to head for that energy, for that feeling, for that atmosphere, all hoping to find something special there. Neukoelln is the center of a new 'urban renaissance' (Shaw, 2009) in Berlin. The move of the 'art scene' here has brought unexpected developments which have resulted in rent increases and ultimately the possible gentrification of Neukoelln.

2. BERLIN'S NEUKOELLN DISTRICT BERLIN'S

The Rixdorf district changed its name to Neukoelln in 1912. The district had a bad reputation (even then) and the government renamed it Neukoelln in order to run away from its negative connotation (Der Ring Bahn, 2010). Neukoelln has an elongated shape and 44.9 sq.km. It has approximately 306,000 residents, and over half of them have Turkish citizenship (they make up about 9% of Berlin's total population) (OECD, 2003). Immigrants make up 38.7% of Neukoelln's residents. In some parts, even 66.1% of the residents are immigrants. The share of Turks in the total foreign population of Berlin was 29.8% in 1999 and they are mainly concentrated in the inner city districts of Wedding, Kreuzberg and Neukoelln (Eckmann, 2007).

By the beginning of the 21st century, this area was becoming a favourable location for the subtle migration of new creative professionals thanks to its specific character and environment of diversity. Here, different ethnic groups are able to create their own ethnic businesses, speciality shops and restaurants. It is common that this kind of so-called ghetto neighbourhood welcomes creativity.

According to a Humbolt University social study, almost every fourth Neukoelln citizen is unemployed (23%). The average net monthly income is just 725 euros while in some parts of the district 73.5% of the residents live on subsistence income (in Richardplatz Süd quarter,

every third resident is poor, with less than 630 euro/month). Neukoelln is home to 165 different nations. Reuterkiez is the most densely inhabited area of Berlin, with 18,500 residents to every 70 hectares (ha). Children in the area lack opportunities and around 70% of the children there do not complete compulsory basic secondary school (60% of children have immigrant origin). There are more green spaces (773 ha) than roadsides (771 ha) in Neukoelln. More than 80 % of old buildings from the Founders' Period (Gründerzeit), the period just before and after Germany's 1871 unification, are still in use (BZ, 2008).

The S-Bahn metropolitan railway's Ring Line runs through the district and connects the area with the historical inner-city. The subway line connects Hermannplatz, the central district square, with the Teltow Canal, Gropiusstadt and Rudow (Der Ring Bahn, 2010). Neukoelln is known for its social housing (*Sozialer Wohnungsbau*), but also for some prominent architectural examples: the horseshoe shaped settlement, Britz, from the 1920s or the high-rise Gropiusstadt settlement (a mix of open green spaces and single family homes built by the end of the 1960s after the Bauhaus ideas and named after the architect Walter Gropius who designed it). South Neukoelln development from the 1960s and 70s demonstrating the trends in West Germany at the time, the building of large scale housing complexes (OECD, 2003).

Berlin had the specific status of an 'island' within the former GDR, where due to the presence of the Berlin Wall, Neukoelln was positioned as a peripheral zone. After World War II, Neukoelln became one of West Berlin's districts. The Tempelhof Airport which supplied West Berlin during the Soviet blockade was located in Neukoelln. Since the fall of the Wall, Neukoelln has become a more central area as it is close to the historical city center, the new government complex and new business centres in Friedrichstraße. In the biggest part of Neukoelln, the densely inhabited housing needs renovation. The urban structure is changing today with the arrival of the 'art scene'.

3. THE NEUKOLLEN PHENOMENON. THE CURRENT MOVE OF AN ART SCENE

The Neukoelln district is changing. We are witnessing today that Neukoelln has been transformed from a socially disadvantaged to a hip urban district with a high concentration of young bohemian residents. Even during the last two years, many people have moved here. But what is it so alluring about Neukoelln?

One of the reasons for its attractiveness is that small studios are cheap enough for artists and students to afford to live in. A number of young people have moved to Berlin from other world metropolises where everything is much more expensive, like London or Paris, in order to be part of this bohemian atmosphere. For them, compared with their previous rents and standard of living, it is very cheap.

Artists have played an immense role in the transformation of the area into a cultural hub. Neukoelln definitely has a favorable position as it is adjacent to Kreuzberg-Friedrichshagen which has already established itself as an attractive alternative scene in recent years. Northern Neukoelln is a mix of trash and graffiti, pop-up stores, bars and cafes, start-up youngsters, emerging artists, small theatres, bohemians and window displays, with Weserstraße as its core. Neukoelln is the new home for global nomads moving from one place to another, addicted to this atmosphere of diversity and endless feeling of freedom, all seeking that 'right place'. Some of them are just young singles who want the active night life of trendy Berlin. To show how open for everyone Neukoelln today is, we have the example of the

culture festival *48 Hours in Neukoelln*. Held in the summer, this festival transforms the neighborhood into an open stage with workshops, readings, concerts, video installations, exhibitions and performances. Any resident of Neukoelln can take part. Thus, in Neukoelln, anyone can be and call himself an artist. According to Florida, 'places are also valued for authenticity and uniqueness. Authenticity comes from several aspects of a community - historic buildings, established neighborhoods, a unique music scene, or specific cultural attributes. An authentic place also offers unique and original experiences. Thus a place full of chain stores, chain restaurants, and nightclubs is not authentic. You could have the same experience anywhere' (Florida, 2003). This is Neukoelln today, authentic and unique.



Fig. 1 Neukoelln Berlin district.

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Emerging artists, designers and other start-up entrepreneurs aim to relocate to such locations and to invite others to move there. This kind of area then becomes a growing collective and sends image to the world of being 'a new place to be'. The residents of this collective have the aim of inviting not just new collective members (new members are also very important for spreading the activities in a collective network), but more importantly, to invite possible buyers, agents and dealers. The idea is to produce, gain attention, exhibit and sell in the same collective neighbourhood. They promote, run their small studios (galleries) and curate themselves using all the advantages of being a part of the 'creative' collective. Here they have the possibility of personal contacts. Living and working at the 'scene' is not something that modern generations have invented. The difference is that today, young emerging entrepreneurs often produce, run, curate, promote and sell their products at the place where they live, usually in the 'right place' in the right neighborhood. They give immense energy in marketing and in promotion of their neighborhood while trying to break into the real market of agents and dealers. While waiting for an agent to arrive, they promote their neighbourhood. By doing community promotion there is a bigger chance of bringing

agents to their neighbourhood, and thus a bigger change for them to be noticed. The more attractive the neighbourhood is, the bigger the chance of making people come to see their work.

There is also the approachability factor. Already established entrepreneurs have their networks of agents and customers who have no problem with travelling, while new entrepreneurs and emerging artists need to be reachable for possible visits. By being located and connected with the community in the neighbourhood they have bigger chances.

To raise interest in what they are doing, the new residents organize collective activities or events. For example, many events bring musicians and visual artists together. For creative community members living in Neukoelln, it is very important to make a venue and to spread the reputation of the neighbourhood that it is worth visiting again, which raises their chances for promotion, and eventually finding the right agent.



Fig. 2 Neukoelln Berlin district.

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Meanwhile, while waiting for the right contacts to arrive by making events, new Neukoelln residents do not have many options available to them. Berlin's funding and support is usually used for creating tax revenue, and therefore put into already established creative entrepreneurs, such as Universal Music or MTV Networks Germany within the Media Spree complex. It is very hard for young non-profit enterprises located in Neukoelln to gain subsidies. There are some local fundings projects, but the rigorous evaluation process does not bring much help for the majority.

Neukoelln is definitely facing a rapid increase in its rents. The neighbourhood is changing too quickly. If you have in mind that you are in one of Berlin's poorest districts, it is not hard to guess what the reaction is of Neukoelln's residents, those who lived there long before the 'art scene' arrived. Some of the old residents are convinced that they are being pushed out as they cannot afford to live in the neighbourhood anymore. In the opinion of some

people in Berlin, the rich young hipsters arriving in Neukoelln nowadays (whether as temporary resident or tourists) are responsible for driving up the rents. 'Tourists go home' is just an example of the graffiti that has appeared recently as a protest.



Fig. 3 Neukoelln Berlin district.
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Fig. 4 Neukoelln Berlin district.
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Fig. 5 Neukoelln Berlin district.
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4. CONCLUSION

The Neukoelln neighbourhood has definitely benefitted from the arrival of young bohemian residents, who have improved the area for all its residents. This improvement and displacement are typical signs of the very complicated subject of gentrification, where politics, economics, culture, and identity intersect. Significant change in Neukoelln is visible but it is too early to talk about gentrification. One of the consequences of this is that rents have been raised, and this has happened because of the absence of strict rent controls. But, was there any alternative?

After unification and during the renewal process, real estate owners were bound to strict rent control, which prevented gentrification. At the beginning of the 21st century, mainly due to the financial crisis, the city changed its housing regulatory policy. Before this change, investors and real estate owners could gain profit on investments even with low rents, all thanks to subsidies. With these changes they were forced to increase rents to retain their profit.

Fighting against rising rents is the aim of the old Neukoelln residents. The same is true for the people who have recently moved in, young people who follow the trend. All the residents need to find a way to keep the neighbourhood stable, which is only really possible with the help of the city because only they have instruments to control rents.

In the case of Neukoelln, gentrification might be a positive process and the district can benefit by current development trends in Berlin. Small independent theatres and art galleries in emerging and dangerous districts attract commerce. With this, Neukoelln might become a more attractive site for investments which will in turn create numerous new opportunities for its residents in the future. However, the importance of Neukoelln as a tourist site and flagship city branding mechanism could be enormous. During the next few years, urban

growth coalitions must invest in the development of creative institutions in Neukoelln if the city wants to spur urban economic development in this area. Neukoelln should use this opportunity. If you force people to move out, then you remove the opportunity for low-income Neukoelln residents to prosper from the newly arrived creativity. If the government does not regulate the rise of rent in Neukoelln, the new art community that has arrived there will also be as forced to move again as they will no longer be able to afford it. This will result in having Neukoelln like it was in the past, poor and boring.

Berlin is unpredictable and in a constant state of change. Neukoelln has space available for new businesses, and its extensive green spaces and good transportation infrastructure are all beneficial for its future development. Cultural districts like Neukoelln, as mixed use areas, might help the process of urban renewal. Renewal policy should not miss this opportunity to develop this traditional poor district and to integrate it within a wider urban structure. Creative industries could be used in the regeneration of this marginalized area. The arrival of the art scene is the first step.

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NEUKOELLN FENOMEN: SKORAŠNJA KRETANJA UMETNIČKE SCENE U BERLINU

Jedan od pozitivnih događaja u periodu posle pada zida bio je stvaranje alternativne umetničke scene, među kojima su Mitte i Prenzlauer Berg imali vodeće pozicije među umetnicima, kao novi centri kreativnih industrija u Berlinu početkom devedesetih. Ubrzo, Mitte i Prenzlauer Berg su postali mesta na kojima su stigle komercijalne kreativne kompanije, pa se zbog toga i umetnička scena preselila u Kreuzberg-Friedrichshain nakon što više nije mogla da priušti povećane rente. Danas smo svedoci premeštanja umetničke scene u Neukoelln, jednog od najproblematičnijih oblasti u Berlinu, gde su migracije u proseku više nego u drugim delovima grada, etničkim tenzijama, lošim socio-demografskim indikatorima i visokom stopom kriminala. Umetnička scena u ovom okrugu nije tako ustanovljena kao što je bila u Mitte-u. Ono što se tamo trenutno događa nije profit, već se više radi o ideji da se nešto dešava u ovom trenutku. Upravo iz tog razloga je prerano donositi zaključke. Kako dolazak umetničke scene utiče na najproblematičnije područje u Berlinu i koji je njen mogući budući uticaj? Za sada, vidimo obnovu berlinskog okruga Neukoelln koje će na kraju dovesti do gentrifikacije. Rezultat takve promene je povećanje rente i bes starosedeoca.

Ključne reči: *Umetnički pravci, brendiranje, Nemačka, javni prostor, globalizacija, posleratni Berling, Nojkeln, kreativna industrija, potkultura, kreativni gradovi*