

In the middle of Berlin, at the Alexanderplatz, one of the last buildings in public hands stays empty at this moment. It looks like a haunted house, 40,000 sqm without windows, 10 floors high, the House of Statistics: headquarters of statistical institutes both of the GDR and later of the Federal Republic of Germany, as well as the East German intelligence agency, Stasi. Today, it is a symbol of the quest for affordable space in the growing city tossed around on the waves of neoliberal globalization. It is a place where two discourses, or better still two fight lines converge: affordable space for housing, working and artistic production, and the question of civil rights and urban citizenship of refugees.

WHAT HAPPENED?

In the so-called “summer of migration” in 2015, 600 people arrived on peak days in Berlin from the war zones in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and from the poverty and cruelty shaken states in sub-Saharan Africa. Women, men, and children made their way to Berlin, taking chancellor Merkel’s words “We make it!”¹ at face value. These dynamics caused a remarkable shift. Long-fought-for changes came at arms length. The selling and use of public lands to the highest bidder became a political ambition. Around the House of Statistics, an initiative² developed, seeking to transform this former Stasi office building into social housing for refugees, students, seniors, as well as, providing spaces for artistic and cultural production and education.

In 1993 Architect Hans Kollhoff’s won the competition for the masterplan for the Alexanderplatz, the central square where the emblematic Berlin TV tower is located. The masterplan foresaw 11, 100 meter-high skyscrapers—a massive intervention into Berlin’s usually 33 meter-eaves. However, the masterplan has not been carried out. In 2015 the plan was revised to reduce the amount of skyscrapers to nine, given the fact that some GDR high-rise buildings had been renovated and given monument protection. At the same time, the pressure on available space in the city has reached a new high: after the financial and euro crisis, international capital was pouring into Berlin, which at about the same time started to grow by about 50,000 inhabitants a year. After decades of stagnant numbers of inhabitants and a subsequent oversupply of available and affordable spaces for housing and production, one of Berlin’s main currencies for its late and alternative success became scarce all of a sudden. Real estate prices were and are roaring, especially compared to the income of Berliners.

There is a threefold hybridity of dynamics at play in Berlin whereby the House of Statistics can be seen as one of its prominent culmination points: The global financial crisis, the increasingly intense debate on

affordable space for housing, but also for cultural production and small businesses, and the summer of migration, which raised the question on how to provide basic human rights to a relatively high number of refugees, and furthermore how to live together as a society.

On one side of the political spectrum the claim for a new approach to citizenship, partly an urban citizenship³, is arising in the wake of the refugee topic. On the other, there is a shift to the right in the political system in Germany and the rest of the EU becomes visible. It can be observed that EU nation-states, including Germany, “expand the modes of control”⁴ of immigrants by harsher enforcement of migratory laws at the borders or even totally close of the national borders like in Hungary. At the same time, cities have deployed stronger enforcement of inner border control, in the sense of continuous control of the immigrant’s legal residency status which is monitored by local authorities and handed over to federal agencies. In this light, the idea of urban citizenship seems to be rather ambiguous in places where a differentiated system of civil rights for different groups of refugees⁵ is in effect. One result of this different-rights-for-different-refugees approach is that discrimination differs between migrant groups: certain groups are systematically marginalized and denied a future in Germany.

This creates a paradoxical situation where refugees are supposed to become part of the cities they arrive to, but on the other hand they have a very hard time in becoming part of the local community and partake in the most basic activities due to unclear legal residency status. In Germany they are not allowed to work if they do not have legal status; they are not allowed to produce their own goods, sell things, not even open a bank account. In many cases they are denied many public services⁶. Access to substantial rights is based on national citizenship, not on residency. Many scholars, politicians, and civil rights groups claim that, in order to form a functioning urban society, access to substantial rights like housing, healthcare, education, and cultural recreation, need to be based not on citizenship, but on denizenship.

However, there is little tangible development towards an urban citizenship approach in cities in Germany even though there are many pragmatic and yet highly inspirational cooperative practices⁷ that cater to refugees. Unlike the sanctuary cities discussion in the USA, in Germany there are no cities that apply local practices that are not in line with federal institutions and procedures to protect its denizens. Looking at Berlin, one could better talk about sanctuary districts that allow for a certain degree and so far unprecedented level of self organization and articulation. Two examples can be seen in this light: a refugee protest camp at the

central Oranien square (2012–2013) in the former western inner city district of Kreuzberg, and an occupied empty school building⁸ in the same district during the same years. Both actions were related to a 500 kilometer protest march from Würzburg to Berlin against the prohibition of work for refugees and the restriction to free movement within Germany and the EU. On both examples, local district tolerated the occupation and wanted to allow space for the protest against federal states policies. In contrast, the city of Berlin on the regional level⁹ wanted to intervene with police force. In both cases the occupations got evacuated by the district and the senate (regional level) after strong protests and the status quo was reinstalled. That was the case in 2014, before the summer of migration.

Today, the war in Syria remains as inhumane as one could imagine, but the influx of migrants has been reduced as a result of a deal with the increasingly authoritarian Turkish regime and the increased support of the stumbling regime in Libya. In this context the House of Statistics remains a symbol of a sanctuary in the city center of Berlin. It is a promise for a user-centered, not only profit driven way of making our city. The chances that the local initiative will accomplish its purposes—affordable housing, spaces for working and for cultural production, as well as living spaces for refugees—remain. The newly elected left regional government—consisting of a coalition of the social democrats, the left party, and the greens—could become an enabler in converting the House of Statistics into a hybrid space which could become a remarkable example of how cities in Europe do not always have to abide by market pressures and how de facto citizen rights can be granted on an urban level.

- 1 “Wir schaffen das!” stated by Chancellor Angela Merkel in a press conference on August 31, 2015 asked for the immigration challenge that year.
- 2 “Initiative Haus der Statistik,” <https://hausderstatistik.org/>.
- 3 The concept of an urban citizenship claims a residency based provision of basic rights rather than a citizenship based one.
- 4 Henrik Lebuhn, “Urban Citizenship, Border Practices and Immigrants’ Rights in Europe: Ambivalences of a Cosmopolitan Project,” *Open Citizenship 4, Issue 2* (2013): 13.
- 5 Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).
- 6 This situation has been worked on by official institutions in the last years, however it has not been resolved in a satisfactory manner.
- 7 Moabit Hilft, Campus Metropolis, Sharehouse Refugio, CUCULA, Akademie der ZUsammenKUNFT (carried out by the Initiative of House of Statistics).
- 8 Gerhart-Hauptmann-Schule
- 9 Berlin is one state of the 16 German states.