

Areas of culture

In this outline, I will try to provide a glimpse into the actual situation of German cultural community work in Berlin and Berlin-Neukölln.

1. In retrospect, we have lost sight of the more or less reliable concepts of cultural work within the communities laid out in the 1970s and 1980s by Hermann Glaser and Hilmar Hoffmann. Known under the catch-word “Kultur für alle” (culture for everyone), we have lost hold of their heroic emphases, in part due to the social and political developments, which have taken place in Germany over the years which followed. Their concepts have been replaced instead by a discussion on “Kultur der Lebensstile” (culture of lifestyles). A diversification of cultures seemed to make common sense, i.e., that each social group has its own culture (the one it deserves). The threatening consequence, however, is that there is no longer the need to cultivate cultural democracy.

2. In keeping with this new position, the concept of “Soziokultur” (roughly, “social culture”) has changed. Its original meanings, encompassing the surrounding social context, function and the responsibility of art and culture, have been misunderstood – and transformed into a kind of social work with cultural tools (for example, “video work with youths”), thereby losing its artistic pretension and quality, and depriving us of a central instrument of cultural democratising. The emerging holes in the urban budgets, and the struggle for the remaining pennies, have guided the budgetary red pencil to the last remaining positions of “Soziokultur” and community cultural work, in order to advance our important, but expensive, cultural heritage: the publicly financed operas, theatres and museums – the so-called “lighthouses.” This tendency within Berlin, the new capital of the reunited Germany, has increased to such a degree that it has become a Moloch which swallows everything. An enormous financial gap, unified with the longing for representative culture, threatens the greater breadth of cultural work so that some of the highlights may be advanced.

3. Unfortunately – but not by chance – most artists have given up their political and social engagement, and care about everything except social life (unless it reflects their own). There are a number of reasons for this development. One of the most significant may be the delusion after the “Deutscher Herbst” (German autumn) in the late 1970s, as well as the failure of political engagement within the arts, since the perish of the German Democratic Republic.

4. The traditionally underdeveloped sector of private engagement for culture in Germany has continued to emerge on a singular plane. Every banking institute has its one gallery, and charitable activities and sponsoring have indeed increased – all happily welcomed by the state. Private money has, of course, been invested for cultural highlights, but generally not for problematic urban zones, not for small projects and community work. In truth, the state has not maintained its responsibility to the communities.

5. The situation is now changing, although it is still limited to some rather small segments of the community. “Soziokultur” seems to have obtained a second chance, although in another vein when compared to the situation in the 1970s and 1980s.

The Programme “Soziale Stadt” (social city):

Small flames have started to flicker among two quite distinct points. One of them has been born of pure emergency: The necessity for municipal districts to interfere in certain quarters, with the aim of protecting the areas from social and economic collapse. Influenced by improvements in the USA, above all in New York City, a programme of urban development called “Soziale Stadt” began two years ago in Berlin. The ministry for urban development picked out town quarters throughout the district with problems of a social focus – most of them were quarters which had been forgotten in the process of reunifying Berlin, and not by chance, are most of them in old western districts, in Neukölln (4), Kreuzberg (2), and Wedding (2), but also some in former eastern districts (Friedrichshain, Prenzlauer Berg). Characteristic of most of them are the problematic substance of the buildings; problems within the local economy; empty, unrentable flats and business spaces; or high fluctuation; high unemployment rates; high percentages of potential customers on public welfare; high rates of non-German residents existing on low social and economic levels.

As an administrator responsible for culture in Neukölln – some call it the “Bronx of Berlin” – I have been witness to an exciting process:

With more or less success, we have tried to form alliances with the local government, residents, labour office, churches, relevant groups, youth organisations, schools and so on in the community. Financial support as well as manpower (two

“Quartiersmanager” are envisioned for every area) have been set in place.

Cultural work was not originally foreseen in this programme, but in the interim the “quarter managers” have understood the power of the cultural framework and the activating possibilities of cultural projects, not only for the individual residents, but for the identity of the entire neighbourhood. In every quarter with a “social focus,” there is a council consisting of elected citizens and active groups, as well as representatives of the city district administration, who decide together the application of the “quarter fund,” a respectable amount granted by the Berlin government. A number of both smaller and larger cultural projects, financed by this fund, have taken shape under these programs, beginning with artists’ projects in empty shops, mural painting projects involving children or senior citizens, as well as a concert series in unusual and/or remarkable places like the tower of a school, a living room of a gay writer, an old cemetery or an unexpected, marvellously built staircase well. Many people who never thought about organising or implementing culture have been encouraged to take cultural interests into their own hands. The obstinacy of people in neglected quarters and the encouragement of the neighbourhood, supported by some funding and the professional assistance of the nearby, accessible quarter managers render a process which I had never before believed possible, although I have spent twenty years working in the district with the most “social focuses,” but am obviously still too far away (the cultural sector of Neukölln is responsible for 320,000 inhabitants). Until now, we had only the possibility of initiating temporary projects arising from our own institutions, like those of our very inventive local museum – cooperating with the residents of the quarter, but nevertheless maintaining responsibility. We were there as hosts, but not as part of the quarter. We are now starting to see the structure of the different quarters as if through a microscope. We have come to discover the kernels of cultural power where we did not expect anything.

New concepts of art

The other flame that has begun to flicker has come from the side of artists. After years of political abstinence, artists have once again begun to understand the social

space as their working field – not as missionaries of a political message as in earlier years, but as a kind of think tank, a measure of social tension and a stumbling block of perception. These artists work in the public sphere – not with eternal sculptures or paintings for the embellishment of squares or buildings, but by looking for a concrete, spatial, situational and social reference for the location of their work, which is most often of a temporary character. Very different concepts and discussions influence the realisation, which float between “contextual art,” “conceptual art,” communicative and interactive dispositions, including new developments in art as a service.

A project called “Areale Neukölln,” realised under our auspices this year, has dared to measure the multiple facets of ephemeral art projects, which refer directly to the public sphere of activity and to have an explanation for it – to give an impulse for the relevance of art in the public space. Seventeen artists were invited to develop projects in Neukölln, attentively prepared with knowledge about the district, the social focus, the way of living, the economic and architectural landscape. The artists proposed projects to take place all over this huge district, on streets, on sporting grounds, in a pub, in the very midst of a major intersection, in a public garden, in a suburban skyscraper. One artist planted a large salad field, mimicking a 16-story building in Gropiusstadt, then harvested the salad – the people living in these surroundings have never discussed art as passionately as they did this past summer. They were affected by the hard work of the artist planting and caring for the plants; intensive talks started; they listened to the roaring of the sea in a public garden; they took vacation in Neukölln (nobody has the idea to take vacation in this district! No tourist dares to come here). Another artist lit the front of another skyscraper in green light – at every window (25 floors, 20 windows for every floor) green bulbs were lit at a certain hour on an August night. For the first time, the residents felt like a community. Another artist opened a Feng Shui office in a very disregarded block; an open air portrait salon was held on one of the most complicated corners; while copied texts by Karl Marx could be taken out of self-service newspaper boxes placed along the Karl-Marx-Straße, Neukölln's main shopping street. I can only mention a few of these projects, but all of them can be viewed in depth on the internet: www.areale-neukoelln.de.

Never before has the public been so involved in a discussion about the sense and nonsense of art in Neukölln. A number of administrative institutions and departments, the police, building owners, industry and trade, traffic, sport clubs, churches and so on, have become actively involved, because they have had to give their permission and allowances. “Areale” has created a network of people and institutions which are willing to make the unusual possible. My own department of cultural affairs has never achieved such allowances. It was the confrontation of the artists and their ideas which opened the minds of bureaucrats.

Culture as a partner in city development

Helpful for new attention and the perception of culture in the communities is the fact that art and cultural projects may change the image of the region, the town, or quarter. As long as we do not play the advertising clown or accept abuse of artistic power, we, too, can play our part in the game, grounded in our own self-interests. We have nothing to gain from an economic and socially impoverished community. For some time, it has been interesting to work in old factories or among historical, industrial ruins, but this denial of the future may also inhibit artistic power. In the new Berlin, we have numerous examples where artists fulfilled their part as property scouts and path finders for investors, paving a vision for a new life. However, after the money was invested, the houses were rebuilt and splendidly restored, the rent

was no longer affordable for artists and they had to move away – to go on and discover the next quarter. This may be an interesting experience for artists working temporarily, but one cannot build a reliable cultural or urban politics in this way. In Neukölln, we try to build a partnership with those, who care for the future of the district or their own economic interest, often combining a most important factor, that of local employment. The general image of Neukölln is a catastrophe. My district is well-known throughout the country, because it maintains the largest administration for public welfare. Its image is shaped by people in jogging suits with ferocious dogs (bull terriers, Staffordshire, etc.), pubs on every corner, rowdy beer drinkers on the streets, and Turkish people, the women veiled in scarves. The weekly journal “Spiegel” gave us the honorary title of the “Bronx of Berlin.” As always, there is a kernel of truth to this, but the district has a lot of hidden treasures and a lot of power on reserve, you just have to look for it. Some very interesting cultural projects, institutions and freelance groups belong to these treasures, like our “Neuköllner Oper,” a very stimulating, avant-garde, operatic ensemble with a solid standing in Neukölln; the “Comenius-Garten,” which translates the philosophy of J. A. Comenius into a public garden; an enchanting puppet theatre museum; a museum of the district which gained the European Museums Award; the “Werkstatt der Kulturen” (a cultural meeting place for non-German communities) which has become a crib of hybrid cross-culture projects; and many more. Young artists often come to the district to work here, while exhibiting, publishing, and performing all over the world – they like the international, but harsh, atmosphere.

Nearly the only positive reports on Neukölln are reports on our cultural projects and events. They offer a hint of the possibilities hidden in the Berlin Bronx.

Our partners are beginning to understand the possibilities of culture to change the image of the district, to work out a new concept of city management, to push forward culture as “local indicator.” This partnership has only just begun, and it is still a tightrope dance, in part due to very diverse interests. Of course, the cultural sector is anxious not to be abused and at the same time interested in gaining local sponsors in this way, while the economic sector is afraid of the pretended or real incalculability of the artistic partners and the persistence of their independence.

The concept of partnership only works if both partners recognise their own advantage. We are trying our very best – maybe it will work, maybe not. Our common goal is the survival of a very interesting living space. It seems to me to present a real chance for the community, as well as a chance for the enrichment of culture.

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