



## Communes in Berlin

## German gentrification

## Lamenting the smartening-up of the old freewheeling Berlin

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TUCKED behind the grand façades along the old Stalinallee in East Berlin—Germany’s “first socialist street”—was another Utopia. Graffiti-splashed Liebigstrasse 14 had ten flats, artists’ studios, two washing-machines and 25 tenants who found room in Berlin for a way of life centred on sharing rather than striving. Films were screened free and half-litres of beer cost a euro. Hard-up residents could skip a few months’ rent. “Collective living means you can share thoughts and emotions,” says Jakob, a Liebig 14 denizen who gives only his first name. “You see how strong the connection between people can be.”

On February 2nd the authorities shut it all down. Thousands of policemen arrived to carry out a court-ordered eviction, though they found only nine tenants. It was the throng outside that worried the police. Berlin’s loose, left-wing “free space” movement quickly took up the cause. Protesters smashed windows, hurled paint and clashed with police. Big business and the state are legitimate targets for those stripped of their rights, they think. “This is not a rampage,” says Jakob.

The nonconformists of Liebig 14 may be a dying breed but they are creating a backlash against gentrification. Berlin’s squatter movement reached its apogee 30 years ago in the west. After the wall fell a second wave ensued, lured by east Berlin’s vacant housing and a breakdown of police authority. Now illegal squats are virtually extinct. Liebig 14, occupied in 1990, started paying modest rents to the city soon afterwards. Mired in debt, the city sold the building to an investor who found a pretext to terminate the leases. Some 2,000-4,000 Berliners still live in such collective dwellings, down from 100,000 at the peak, reckons Armin Kuhn, who studies the phenomenon. A dozen are left in Friedrichshain, Liebig 14’s trendy neighbourhood. “Room for an alternative way of life is getting ever smaller,” says Mr Kuhn.

Rows about rising rents and their effect on Berlin’s character are spreading. Because of the city’s isolation and its former wall, the population in the centre is a socioeconomic jumble, poor by the standards of west European capitals. Although rents are still enticingly low they have risen fast (by roughly 20% between 2007 and 2010). Housing subsidies to poor families



In defence of our island Utopia

are not keeping pace. The number of one-person households has soared, increasing demand for flats. Residents of Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg, which straddles the old border, pay 30-50% of their income in rent, says Franz Schulz, the district's mayor. "That's why gentrification is so intense."

For a city fed up with being "poor but sexy" this is not all bad. Its future depends on attracting clever creative types who are not averse to designer coffee. Even the romantics of Liebig 14 play their part, seeding neighbourhoods with colour and creativity. They are unwilling "pioneers of gentrification," says Mr Kuhn.

These worries may now go mainstream. Mediaspree, a scheme to settle media and telecoms companies along the river, was rejected in a 2008 referendum partly because voters feared rising rents. The project is going ahead with modifications. "Anger about rents is on the rise," says Mr Schulz. "The population is slowly realising there's a structural problem." Even those in favour of urban renewal think it can go too far. Nobody wants another Prenzlauer Berg, a region north of Friedrichshain that Mr Schulz calls a high-income "monostructure". Berlin needs niches for mini-Utopias but does not know how to protect them. Unless it does, the city will be richer but duller.

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