

Turkish Communities, Gentrification, Counter-Cultural Movements in Berlin

The Guest Worker Program

Timeline:

- After World War II, West Germany experienced an "economic miracle" (*Wirtschaftswunder*), marked by rapid industrial growth and labor shortages.
- Gastarbeiter (Guest Workers) Program
- In 1961, Germany signed a bilateral labor agreement with Turkey, allowing Turkish workers to come to West Germany for employment, primarily in factories, construction, and other labor-intensive sectors.
- Over time, the Turkish population became Germany's largest immigrant group.

Kreuzberg

- Neglected by urban developers, decaying infrastructure and low rent.
- A stronghold of the Turkish diaspora and a vibrant cultural enclave, known for its markets, mosques, cafes, and community life. It was often referred to as “Little Istanbul.”
- Kreuzberg was also home to alternative subcultures—artists, squatters, and activists who were drawn to its cheap rents and radical politics.
- The district became a laboratory for new forms of expression: feminist print shops, independent theaters, radical bookstores, and self-organized festivals.





Barriers to upward mobility

- Low-wage, low-skill labor sectors such as manufacturing, construction, and cleaning services—positions often referred to as "3D jobs": dirty, dangerous, and demeaning.
- Lack of access to training programs or promotions, and their foreign qualifications were often not recognized.
- Children faced limited pathways to university education or white-collar employment, placed into Hauptschule. Second and even third generations face same barriers.

Gentrification

- Subsequent revaluation of inner-city districts precipitated a wave of neoliberal urban restructuring.
- State-led re-development initiatives, deregulated housing markets, and the influx of capital investment have led to the commodification of Kreuzberg.
- As property values soared, rent increases and evictions became common, disproportionately affecting working-class Turkish-German households lacking legal ownership or long-term rental protections.

Gentrification

1. Displacement of long-term Turkish residents - rising rents, evictions, loss of rent-controlled housing
2. Disappearance of Turkish-run businesses
3. Fragmentation of extended families, loss of local support systems, threatening spaces that's religious and cultural hubs
4. Senses of alienation and unwelcome; tensions between newcomers and previous residents, marginalization in urban narratives
5. Land changes: displacement of Turkish-owned markets, “wellness” as class marker, lifestyle branding and marketing

Squatting and Counterculture

- The economic crisis of the 1970s, coupled with a dearth of affordable housing, gave rise to the squatting movement in West Berlin. Kreuzberg, in particular, became a focal point of this movement.
- While early squats were often led by leftist, predominantly German activists, Turkish families and youth joined to contest both landlord exploitation and state neglect.

SO36

- Located near the Berlin Wall, Kreuzberg 36 (SO36) was isolated yet central.
- Became home to Turkish Gastarbeiter and marginalized communities in the 1970s–80s. Attracted punk subcultures, squatters, artists, and political activists. Known for anarchist and leftist movements.
- Squatted buildings turned into community spaces.
- SO36 Club: Punk venue, queer-friendly cultural hub.
- Alternative bookshops, feminist collectives, and DIY venues thrived.
- Grassroots projects: Cooperative housing; Migrant-led initiatives

Interview with a Squatter

“ The foreigners were in a situation where they could do very little for themselves because of the *Ausländergesetz* (laws for foreigners). A lot of them had been living for a long time in squalid and terrible conditions. At the time we thought it was possible to get something done for these people. We collected lots of data and information and had discussions with the Senate, but despite the lot of hard work we put into it and the press coverage, it was a total failure.”

“We got together figures of about 10,000 empty flats in the city, and we tried to put legal pressure on the Senate to rent these flats. We got a lot of verbal concessions in the beginning and we thought we had gained something but nothing really positive was achieved by it.”

“The police have searched a lot of houses. What does this mean to the houses being searched?”

“It means an awful [lot] of uncertainty, because nobody knows when the police are going to come. A lot of the houses the police have been to have been vandalised - they've wrecked some of the places they have been into. They come very early in the morning and people are hardly ever prepared for them. The squatters are usually taken to one of the larger police stations for identification and questioning. In most cases they are charged with trespassing, with resisting arrest and more recently with with stealing gas and electricity. And in some cases with Law 129a *Bildung einer kriminellen Vereinigung* - which is conspiracy. (Law 129a was introduced specifically to suppress the RAF.) In a lot of the houses the police have been so rough and so brutal with the people and their possessions that this has caused a lot of anger.”

<https://libcom.org/article/interview-squatter-frank-jackson>

Escalation with press coverage: people are not only concerned with housing, but also with andere Lebensformen (other ways of life)

Young, naïve, politically aware, intelligent

- Squatting is not just sitting on your backside and doing nothing. There is fantastic potential in the houses, and given a certain amount of freedom within the environment it could really grow. It would really hurt me to see that destroyed by this mindless draufschlagen (hammering/destroying), by this clearing-out of the houses.
- In many ways the houses are like small plants, in the right conditions they will start to grow and a lot will come out of them, but if you start tearing up the earth and withholding water, you destroy them. In the houses a lot of people are trying to be creative and sensitive towards their environment, but when there is continuous violence from the outside, there must be some reaction to it, they become nervous and edgy, and maybe in the long run very resigned.





Köpi

Anti-Gentrification Symbol

Köpi stands as a powerful symbol of resistance against Berlin's accelerating gentrification. As one of the city's most iconic squats, it represents the ongoing fight to protect affordable, communal, and self-managed spaces from market-driven urban redevelopment.

Site of Protest and Activism

The residents of Köpi, along with a broad network of supporters, frequently organize protests, public demonstrations, and solidarity campaigns. These actions aim to oppose eviction threats, defend housing rights, and draw attention to the social costs of gentrification.

Cultural Stronghold

Beyond its political role, Köpi is a hub for punk, alternative, and anti-establishment culture. Its walls, events, and lifestyle embody a counter-narrative to commercialized city life, sustaining a legacy of grassroots resistance and radical creativity.

It has enjoyed somewhat of a cult status as a center of alternative culture since its foundation, with an international reputation beyond Germany. The Køpi, self-described as a “living and cultural project” (Wohn- und Kulturprojekt), is home to about one hundred people—50 in the building, and 50 in an adjacent Wagenplatz (trailer park). In addition to the residences, the building includes non-commercial venues such as a bar, a free movie theater, and a printing workshop, among others.

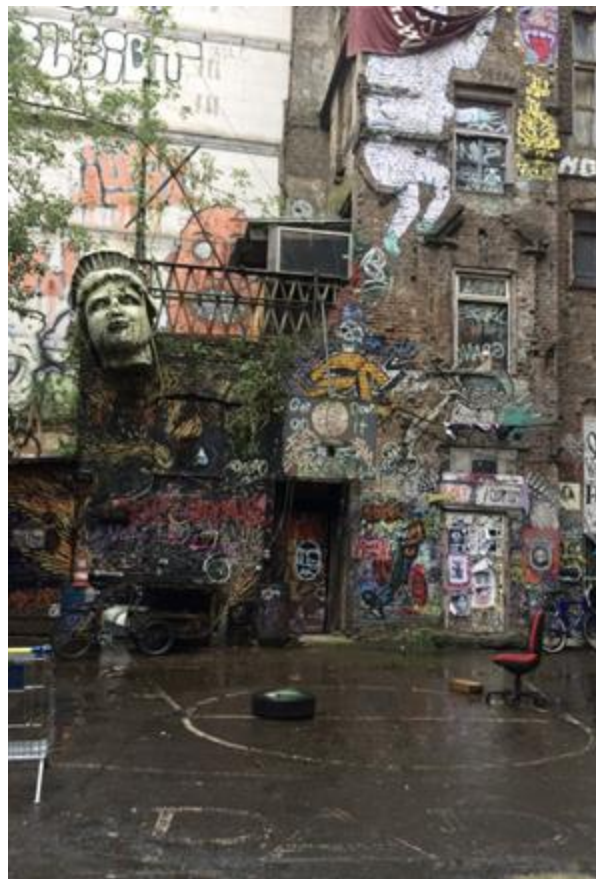
The Køpi began when a group from West Berlin occupied the vacant, semi-destroyed building on Köpenickerstrasse 137, on February 23 1990, in what was then East Berlin, near the border with the western district of Kreuzberg.

The squatters were attracted, among other things, by the many large rooms in the building, which was owned by the GDR government. It had been used as a sports facility during the GDR era, but by 1990 it had been vacated and was slated for demolition. It was the squatting and the creation of the Køpi that prevented its demolition.

Documentary on 10 Jahre Köpi

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KYqSa2jt2pA>





Street Art











The very word “grassroot art” itself resonates with plant metaphors such as “roots”, rootedness”, “groundedness”, “rhizomes”.

In fact, the form of graffiti art, with their paradoxically controlled and wild, amateurish, and artistic lines and markings, resembles a bewildering multiplicity of stems and roots which may cross at any point to form a variety of connections or potentialities.

Graffiti art belongs to the category of counter-production art—forms of expression that resist crystallizing into a singular, unifying aesthetic. Instead, they proliferate through diverse lines of growth, thriving organically and unpredictably outside the institutional frameworks of galleries, museums, and market-driven competitions. Graffiti abandons traditional modes of production and seeks to escape a world in which the most precious aspects of life are reduced to fixed properties, governed by systems of commodification and control.

