

In the beginning of the 1980s the squatting movement was an important topic within the local politics of Berlin. This movement was triggered by increased housing shortage while entire streets of apartments were being evicted, ultimately leading to their decay. The fall of the Berlin Wall in the beginning of the 1990s was followed by a second squatting wave which led to the formation of many self-governed cultural spaces in Berlin. Even today there are hundreds of residential and cultural spaces in the city which emanated from former squats. While different urban protest movements were regaining strength, 2012 marked the increase of many house and place squattings. For example, in June of 2012 retirees squatted their meeting point in the district of Wedding in order to ensure that it would survive. Residents from around the subway station Kottbusser Tor built a “Gecekondu”, a hut as a location to meet and protest against rising rents and displacement. The hut is still there and in use today. At the end of 2012 refugees organized a protest camp at Oranienplatz to fight against their bad living conditions. They also squatted a former school building in Kreuzberg during the so-called “Refugee Strike” in December of 2012. These current examples show that squattings have had and continue to have a significant meaning for social battles in Berlin. The project Berlin besetzt (English: Berlin squatted) wanted to depict the Berlin squatting history in form of an interactive city map. Since the central topic of the house squatting movement is the appropriation of urban space, its history must be presented spatially.

Berlin Besetzt is an interactive online street map combined with a digital archive about the history of house and place squatting in Berlin. The project tells the story of house squattings in Berlin as an example of the self-empowered interventions of protest movements in urban space and urban life. The map explains the motivations for squatting, revealing some of them and also showing what has become of the created places today. The map wants to visualize collective and self-governed spaces, meaning the representation of resisting actors and spaces within the struggle for the right to the city in order to show that political fights/ movements can be successful. The map is intended to be a contribution to the political debate and to show the urban space of Berlin as a result of fights for appropriation of space. The starting point for this description is today’s Berlin – the visible result of the movement.

The Formation Process Visualizing the Movements Archive

Since the topic “house squattings in Berlin” has so far been covered only by few scientific publications in its entirety, the used data are based primarily on in-scene publications, newspaper articles and our own research. Some documents are fragmentary and contradictory at times. In many cases “scientific” verification is hardly possible. Several years of research were initiated to close the knowledge gaps in urban and movement history.

The Papiertiger archive and the Kollektivbibliothek Bethanien, both archives of social movements in Berlin, provided us with ample original documents on house squatting in Berlin. We collected data on locations and times of the squattings, the history of the single houses and the events of the history of the movement from sources such as flyers, journals and journal articles (of which we were able to digitalize a large amount). We were also able to convince Umbruch Bildarchiv to contribute their comprehensive photo collection to the project. A timeline of events was taken from the book *Autonome in Bewegung* (Grauwacke, 2008) and edited. In addition, we interviewed activists, some of whom were from different eras and some of whom had participated in the squatting, during which we had painstakingly created growing Excel tables.

The collected data were entered into a database which was then connected to an Open-Street-Map. This map is visually accessible online at berlin-besetzt.de. The Excel tables containing the raw data are also updated regularly and can be downloaded from the website (see section “About” for a link). The map’s display method enables a fast overview of hundreds of project spaces as well as an intuitive navigation through a comprehensive archive of thousands of datasets and documents on squatting actions. The project is supposed to be self-explanatory, thus being accessible for people without prior knowledge. At the same time it should supply detailed knowledge for experts and scientists. We decided to use a factual and universally accepted picture language that addresses not only subcultural scenes. The online map is primarily intended for the use with the computer at home. Nevertheless, it can also be used for exhibitions and individual city explorations with the use of the smartphone.

Reactions to the Publication

The website’s publication created an enormous echo. The press and the social networks circulated the news of the publication like a political sensation. We received a lot of e-mails in which (former) activists and members of initiatives and housing projects expressed their gratitude, congratulated us or sent us corrections. By now the project has repeatedly been cited as a source on different occasions focusing on the topic of squatting. Even the German Historical Museum has exhibited the website temporarily as a computer terminal. On the one hand, this shows the importance of conducting your own historical work, instead of leaving it to mainstream media and science institutions. On the other hand, it shows the power of easily understandable visualizations. Interesting is that we often received feedback from mostly older activists, telling us that the re-writing of the squatting history was unnecessary and useless since the movement already failed and is over. However, the reactions to the publication showed the opposite to be the case. The boulevard newspaper *Berliner Kurier*, for example, contributed a whole double page spread to the coverage under the headline “The squatters’ second summer – They are still there even though the spook should be over by now” (Fleischmann, 2014). The part that focuses on “the squatters’ second summer” cannot mean the revival of house squattings: Prior to the publication of the map, there were hardly any successful squattings in the past 20 years. Moreover, it must be the publication of the map that was perceived as an uprising of the movement since it again visualized the struggles for a right to the city.

The Lessons of International Dissemination

In collaboration with the SqEK (Squatting in Europe Collectives), a network made up of activists and researchers on the topic of house squattings, there was the opportunity to publish an international version of the map. The data for this map had been collected by SqEK members within the context of the MOVOKEUR project. The latter was a collective research project on house squattings in Europe. However, the realization of this project confronted us with some problems we have outlined as follows:

- The work in a large group structure meant enormous additional effort. For example, the collective communication via e-mail is a tough process if it covers many countries with different languages.
- If and how the maps will be further updated depends on the individuals’ willingness to engage in hard voluntary work or to find alternative possibilities of financing. The running costs for things like web servers and programming can also be an obstacle.
- A common website/map seems to provide an objective comparability of the displayed information. Yet in reality

only a few cities were incorporated into the work. The research for every city was conducted by different groups or single individuals. Depending on the availability of information sources, prior knowledge or individual work speed, some data sets are mostly complete while others are far from being complete.

- There are also differences in the evaluation of what is important for the history of certain movements. The Barcelona map, for example, only shows social centers since residential squattings occur too often to depict all of them. Similar to Madrid, they mostly exist informally in to order avoid discovery and subsequent eviction. In Italy people even protested against the publication of the map, since the available information could lead to attacks by Neo-Nazis and the police.

This leads to the final question if it wouldn't be more sensible to always produce independent maps, that live up to the standards of differences between movement history, the data research as well as the intention of producing the map in the first place. It would be nice to find a creative solution in order to show similarities and relations of the movements to each other. We all can definitely learn a lot from their histories.

Links

berlin-besetzt.de
maps.squat.net
sqek.squat.net
movokeur.wordpress.com

References

Fleischmann, M. 2014. Die Szene Lebt: Der Zweite Sommer der Hausbesetzer. Berliner Kurier. berliner-kurier.de/berlin/kiez—stadt/die-szene-lebtder-zweite-sommer-der-hausbesetzer-1030090, 13 June 2017.
Grauwacke, A.G. 2008. Autonome in Bewegung: aus den Ersten 23 Jahren. Berlin: Assoziation A.

Illustrations

Map right column by Pappsatt Collective / reclaimyourcity.net in collaboration with Papiertiger archive, Umbruch image archive, Kollektivbibliothek Bethanien, Eike Send etc.

Photograph 'Eviction at Fränkelufer' by Michael Kipp / Umbruch Bildarchiv: Eviction at Fränkelufer in Kreuzberg on 24 March 1981.

Photograph 'Skalitzer Straße' by Manfred Kraft / Umbruch Bildarchiv: Skalitzer Straße in Kreuzberg between Kottbusser Tor and Görlitzer Bahnhof, beginning of the 1980s.

Photograph 'Refugees occupied a roof top' by Oliver Feldhaus / Umbruch Bildarchiv: In September 2014, refugees occupied a roof top on Guertelstraße in order to protest against inhumane and illegal asylum politics by the Berlin Senate, and to demand basic services.

Photograph 'Cuvry Straße' by Nico Baumgarten: The empty lot on Cuvry Straße was home to a diverse group of people until their eviction in 2014.