

The AlterPlaces

Alter-Places Urban Spree Workshop - Berlin, Germany // 26 - 28 February, 2025



Urban Spree is a cultural and artistic venue in Berlin, located in the former RAW railway complex in the Friedrichshain district, near Warschauer Straße. Originally a train repair workshop during the GDR era, the site was abandoned after the fall of the Berlin Wall and later revived by artists and alternative collectives.

Today, Urban Spree features a gallery for urban art, artist workshops, a live music venue, a beer garden, and a specialized bookstore. Its outdoor walls showcase constantly changing murals, and the space regularly hosts exhibitions, concerts, markets, and workshops. It's a key spot in Berlin's alternative cultural scene, though currently facing pressure from gentrification.



Our Berlin workshop was a key touchstone for a project focused on alternative spaces. The city's reputation as an underground cultural destination flourished through several distinctive waves in the twentieth century. Its recent explosion of cultural tourism has championed and memorialized the city's alternative history, while placing it under increasing threat through strains of gentrification, commercialization, and rising costs of living.



URBAN SPREE

PROGRAM THEMES

The relationship between cultural and real estate development featured heavily in program discussions. Symbols of this change were all too visible: Urban Spree sits almost directly under the shadow of a new Amazon skyscraper, towering hundreds of stories over its immediate surroundings. In Friedrichschain, the once iconic locus of Berlin's seedy, subcultural underbelly, dilapidated, historied buildings sit side by side with hulking corporate developments. Urban Spree's neighbouring music venues include small indie bars and clubs, as well as a stadium arena owned and operated by Uber – yes, that Uber.

Through tours of Urban Spree and the surrounding neighbourhoods, we explored the context of this accelerating juxtaposition on Berlin's ACPs, alongside the influence of commercialization, patrimonialization, and post-pandemic pressures.



Culture in Transition



In the heart of East Berlin, R.A.W. Gelände is a multi-tenanted, multi-purpose cultural centre that emerged in 1999, when a group of artists began renovating the structures of an abandoned 19th century train repair yard. The group consolidated under RAW Tempel e.V., initiating a site-wide lease with the land owners. Today, R.A.W. Gelände is the largest sociocultural-designated space in Berlin. As the association dissolved in 2015, leases are now negotiated with the landowners on a tenant-by-tenant basis.

The entire area has been sold by the City to a private developer, and the fate of every actor in its path will be determined by the owner's master plan. While many residents will have the opportunity to remain, their continued existence will be quite literally shaped by this private vision.

Uncertain fates: the “protection” of ACPs through private development

The owners have proposed a redevelopment that introduces a complex of offices and housing. The proposal seeks to “preserve” the site's social and cultural value by repurposing the existing built form without displacing the entirety of the R.A.W. community.

The redevelopment will place high-density, mixed-use buildings in adjacent proximity to clubs, performance venues, and galleries – a shift that will result in the eviction of a portion of RAW's tenants, and irrevocably change the aesthetics and dynamics of the neighbourhood. Many tenants and civilians are protesting the proposal. An “alternative plan” was presented to us by a guerilla architect, Carsten Joost, who is advocating to both the City and the developer in support of a more integrated build and less interventionist approach that prioritizes green spaces, more room for cultural and common grounds, and keeps the new developments closer to the sizes of the buildings that surround them.

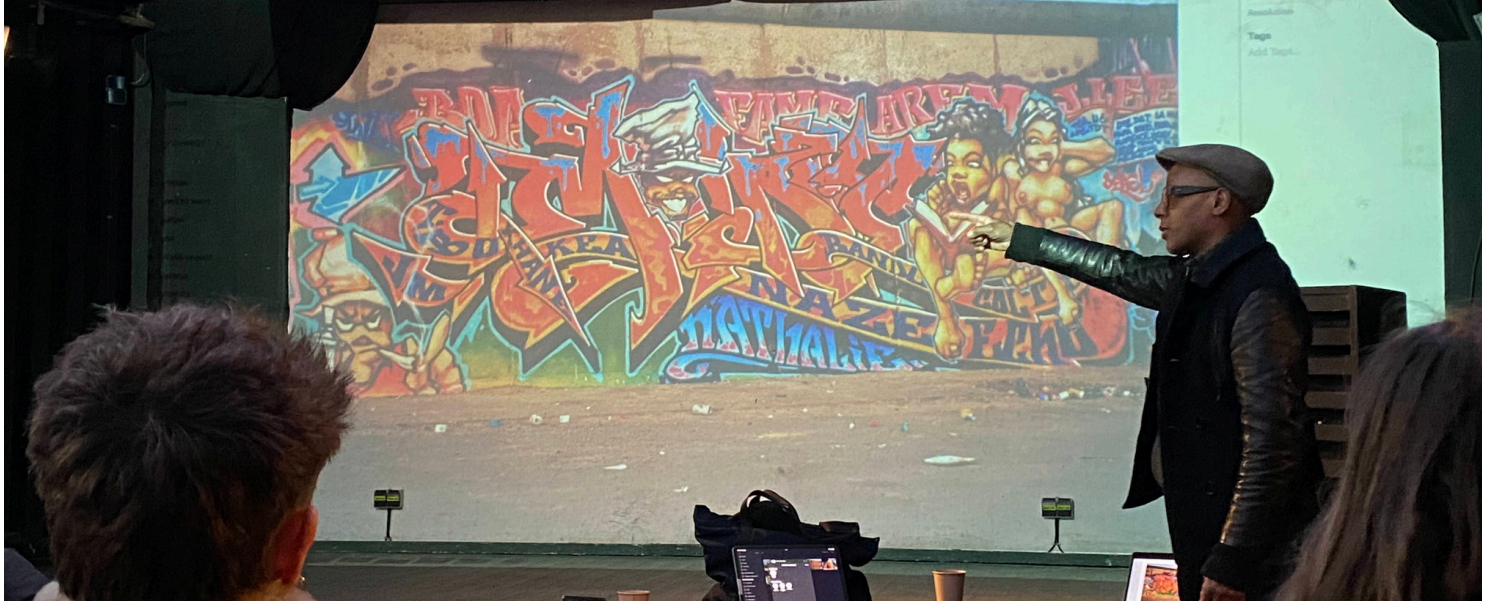
The inclusion of Urban Spree and other cultural residents from RAW in the developer's master plan represents a questionable “win” in a troubled context. On the one hand, it speaks to the status alternative culture has assumed at the state level in Berlin, as well as the feisty resilience of ACPs and their supporters. What persistence looks and feels like for these spaces remains to be seen. It can be argued that a good portion of Berlin underground culture remains in all but its essence. Superficial markers like gritty, post-industrial aesthetics or customs like Berghain's now-mythologized opaque door policy can sometimes give way to mechanisms that more closely resemble dynamics of a commercial club than an illegal party. What happens when even those aesthetics are modified, in this case to fit the uniformity of a contemporary condo developer? Are ACPs truly being empowered as agents of change—or instrumentalized to “art-wash” the gentrifying practices of capitalist interests?

Commodification of underground culture

ACPs often emerge from the underground, rooted in autonomy and resistance to dominant cultural norms. As their aesthetics and energy gain visibility in European cities, they become increasingly commodified. What was once marginal becomes marketable: underground styles are adopted by brands, language is absorbed by institutions, and spaces are targeted by real estate developers.

Berlin's government and cultural industries have recognized the value of playing up an "underground" appeal, and many have literally capitalised on this opportunity, for the benefit of business, but a resultant shift of scene and "vibe" – the consequences of community venues being overrun by tourists. The impact on these spaces has been mixed: protections and tax reductions for venues under heritage by-laws, but rising prices for operating and living in the city. Whether motivated by opportunism or threat, plenty of DIY spaces have commercialized to survive. Other spaces - many of them icons of Berlin's underground club scene - shuttered during the pandemic. An evocative photo series presented to Alter-Places partners by artist Lotte Agger quietly observes this transformation in the breathless moment between the party and its aftermath. The exhausted tipping point captured in her club-wide still lifes draws easy parallels to the shift in cultural vitality of many post-COVID cities.





STREET ART: HISTORY AND EVOLUTION

Our walking tours took us just a little further from R.A.W. to the East Side Gallery at the Berlin wall. We learned that the official cultural infrastructure for the wall has been through many conflicting phases - some of which offered even more precedent for the commercialization and exploitation of underground culture. After being invited to contribute work for free, many artists never saw a cent for their labour or royalties, despite subsequent sales of wall pieces through Christie's auction house. Some artists - like Jim Avignon, who joined us to present his section - reclaimed ownership by leaving messages of protest, like his blunt denunciation, neatly covering the entirety of his original painting: "MONEY MACHINE."

Today, the public "gallery" for the wall is stewarded by a civilian-driven process, but arguments over the historicization of street art and the role of wall as cultural monument persist: should "original" paintings on the wall be continuously restored, to maintain their original look and value? If so, which of the many layers and periods should be prioritized? When called on to update their works, should artists be allowed to re-configure their own images to reflect shifting personal and political context? Should aesthetic "integrity", past or present, be protected via a curated process, or should the guerilla, subversive nature of the wall's medium (graffiti) trump with a laissez-faire approach that permits new tags, scratches, commentary, and other daily, illegal contributions?

While there may not be clear answers, such existential considerations are integral to questions of how to "sustain" alternative culture - by nature and practice an emergent, often covert, and self-organized process. Future cities will continue to bear witness to the outcomes of the choices communities, government, and developers make today about how to "preserve" this living, divergent, socially-embedded form of cultural heritage.

A final working session

While in Berlin, we were able to take advantage of a final in-person opportunity to further our collective work, particularly towards our prototypes. Each prototype working group finalized plans for their delivery. The full Alter-Places consortium considered exhibition design: how we wanted our findings to be communicated and experienced; possibilities and limitations of the space; publics who would have access; and surrounding programming for the concluding weekend in Paris.



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