**“Struggling for Rights in the Creative City: the Case of the *Wagenburgen* in Berlin.”**

**Abstract**

*This paper asserts that activists can carve out a political space between cooptation and autonomy within neoliberal hegemony but that the breadth of this space depends on the micro-political spaces that activist organizations operate in. In this way, the margins of maneuver for radicals can vary in important ways in cities governed by the same general policy agenda. This general issue is examined through an in-depth ethnographic study* *of two trailer encampments (Wagenburgen) located in central Berlin. These trailer communities occupy previously abandoned wastelands in Berlin and have strong ties to the city’s squatter movements. The dominant discourse of the creative city has served as a constraint and an opportunity. Both cases reveal that activists are conscious that their abilities to sustain their communities and political functions require them to present themselves in a way that coincides with the “creativity” discourse of the city. Both have fashioned new discursive frames and introduced events that demonstrate how they contribute to making Berlin dynamic and creative, but the encampment in the more conservative district also started rooting out the more radical members and attracting new members who embrace the creativity discourse.*

**Introduction**

The literature on neoliberal urbanism and the post-political city suggests the declining possibilities for transgressive politics in European and North American cities (Swyngedouw 2009). “Accumulation by dispossession” has meant that private property rights have squeezed out alternative forms of collective and state property rights (Harvey 2005). The ascendancy of private property rights has been coupled with an increasingly dominant form of neoliberal citizenship (Hindess 2002; Ong 2006). The “good” urban citizen is conceived as a person who can make a contribution to the economic vitality of the city. Rights to the city are accorded to those who can demonstrate their value as economic subjects. This provides them with the “right to have rights” to the city (Arendt 1973; Benhabib 2004; Somers 2009). This recognition facilitates access to key resources and spaces within their urban worlds and provides legitimacy to make rights claims in the city. By contrast, those who cannot reveal their utilitarian value become targets of discipline and banishment. They may protest their marginalized status but they ultimately lack recognition as fully deserving members of the community. They do not have “right to have rights” to the city. Consequently, their grievances, claims, and arguments are received as “noises” of an inarticulate mob rather than the “voices” of a legitimate political subject (Dikeç 2004).

If neoliberalism has become a dominant rationality underlying notions of urban citizenship, we must ask how is it possible that certain activist groups continue to exert their right to stay in the city. This paper explores this question through a close study of “trailer encampments” in Berlin. These are settlements on squatted public lands made up of self-defined countercultural radicals. While Berlin has embraced a market-driven land use policy and a “creative city” ideology, these squatted settlements have continued to sustain themselves in central areas of the city. By providing a concrete space where Berlin activists can connect, talk, and plot, the trailer encampments play a strategic role in sustaining Berlin’s robust radical political milieu. These trailer encampments are by no means unique. Indeed, social centers and squats have continued to operate in many European cities in the face of criminalization, police repression, cooptation, and stigmatization (Martinez 2012; Squatting Europe Kollective 2012). Through a detailed case study of the Berlin case, we hope to shed light on how some activists struggle to sustain rights claims in a neoliberalizing city.

This paper suggests that politically hostile environments reduce the margins of maneuver of urban activists but they do not necessarily shut them down entirely. Even in the most inhospitable contexts, discursive and institutional cracks open up which provide some groups small, niche openings to advance their cause. Following on the work of Colomb and Novy (2012), we suggest the ‘creativity discourse’ has provided trailer encampments a small opening in the face of mounting pressures of dispossession. The city depends on the cultural resources produced by activist networks in Berlin. This dependency has provided those in possession of creative attributes with leverage to assert their right to stay in the city. For city officials, the value derived from these unique cultural producers offsets the costs of allowing them to occupy large parcels of scarce land in the middle of the city.

Creativity as a dominant policy discourse and agenda has indeed become an opportunity as much as a constraint. However, we also suggest that opportunities facing activists and their associated strategies to assert their rights to the city vary sharply according to political districts:

In center-right districts, trailer encampments have faced great pressures by elected officials. Activists in these encampments have been compelled to respond with a strategy of “political identification” (see, Nicholls 2013). This strategy maintains that a group has a particular right to a political community (“right to have rights”) becauseit conforms to the existing norms and expectations of the community. The group *deserves* rights not because its members are equal human beings but because they are good contributors to the political community. The strategy is enacted through arguments that stress normative conformity, networks aimed at building alliances with the dominant cultural groups (e.g. the gentrifying middle classes), and creating a political group that is thoroughly disciplined into the conduct and language of the existing order of things. The members of this trailer encampment have made themselves into the good political subject of creative Berlin, becoming an important contributor in the city’s effort to the capital of hip Europe.

We find a very different process in the left political district of the city. Political officials also have strong incentives to privatize public lands and squeeze out squatters of all types. However, in a district with high concentrations of left-wing constituents, its political legitimacy depends on its ability to demonstrate left credentials. In this context, the encampment has responded by pursuing a two-prong strategy that we call ‘in-betweenness’: it has engaged in light creative activities *and* it works to sustain ties to left-wing activists throughout the district. The creative part of the strategy allows it to gain support from the broader Berlin public and political establishment while the activist part of the strategy allows it to mobilize grassroots networks to push back on pressures from district officials. Thus, the dominant creative discourse and agenda of the city provides an opening for wagon encampments to assert their position as rights deserving subjects on the basis of their creative capacities. However, their strategies for asserting rights claims varies dramatically by the kinds of political opportunities and dynamics found in local political districts of cities.

The paper is composed in four parts. Part one outlines a general theory of neoliberal urban citizenship and identifies the kinds of opportunities and openings within this kind of urban citizenship regime. Part two describes the methods employed. Part three provides a general description of Berlin’s discursive, political, and institutional structure. Part four lays out the case illustrating the ‘identification’ strategy of claims making. Part five presents the case on the ‘in-between’ strategy.

**I. Rights to the Neoliberal City**

*Neoliberal Urban Citizenship*

The ‘rights to the city’ literature describes how people resist neoliberal policies, but it has not described how neoliberalism has reconstituted urban citizenship and reconfigured the ways in which rights and obligations are distributed to urban inhabitants. We suggest that structural, institutional, and cultural forces have aligned to produce a form of neoliberal urban citizenship which shapes how people (elites and residents alike) think about who deserves *recognition* as rights deserving members of the political community. In addition to shaping understandings of the ‘right to have rights’ to the city (see Arendt 1973), this form of citizenship also identifies who poses a threat to the political community and what the appropriate courses of governmental action (discipline or banishment) should be taken to address this threat (Hindress 2002; Ong 2006). Activists seeking to assert their ‘right to the city’ do so within fields restricted by this form of urban citizenship. They struggle to re-appropriate the city but they do so under conditions not of their own choosing.

The scholarship on neoliberalism suggests that the breakdown of territorial Keynesianism and increased inter-urban competition spurred greater dependency on markets. Local officials have been compelled to develop policies aimed at attracting investors and middle class residents to live and visit their cities (Mayer 1998; 1999; Peck and Tickell 2002; Brenner 2004). Local officials have experienced greater pressures (real and perceived) to prioritize groups that would expand revenue flows, create jobs, attract more investors, and reduce costly welfare expenditures. The privatization of urban space and services through the ‘accumulation through dispossession’ also privileges the rights of private property holders over other kinds of collective rights (Harvey 2005). In such a context, those who are deemed contributors to the economic vitality of the city – because of their skills, money, and / or culture – or possess private property are deemed to more deserving of urban rights. Those groups lacking private property and certain forms of capital (economic, cultural, symbolic) are likely to be viewed as less important and deserving members of the urban community. Their lack of strategic resources and attributes weakens their position as rights deserving subjects in the urban community. They are viewed as drains and threats to the community and consequently they need to be disciplined or banished from the territory (Wacquant 2004; Dikeç 2006). These structural forces have therefore combined to create a rights regime that favors certain groups of people (private property owners, investors, middle classes) over others (tenants, low income workers, the poor). Recognition of the right to stay, use, and shape the city is therefore tied to one’s capacity to contribute to its economic growth.

The structural changes precipitating a shift in the attributes that make one deserving of urban rights have been coupled with important normative changes. In the context of neoliberal citizenship, individuals are obligated “to take on more responsibility for their own welfare requirements” (Raco and Imrie 2000: 2188). This indicates a shift in the moral and normative underpinnings of citizenship (Schinkel 2008; Tonkens 2011). The ‘good citizen’ assumes ‘responsibility’ for their own lives and becomes an ‘active’ member of their community. Those who assume responsibilities for their lives and actively engage in civic and economic life are more deserving of rights than those who ‘passively depend’ on the welfare state. Richard Florida’s (2002) well-known intervention provided policy makers and elected officials with an archetype of the good urban citizen. People with creative attributes have been praised because they were active, responsible, and creative members of the community and their activities generated urban environments with buzz and effervescence. This improved civic life and attracted more ‘creative’ people to these places. The geographic concentration of creative people attracted high-value firms seeking a well-educated, dynamic, and innovative workforce. The creativity discourse has therefore provided a normative rationale to prioritize the rights of creative people while simultaneously legitimating the subordination of the ‘non-creative’ working class (Peck, 2005).

These understandings of the ‘good citizen’ and who deserves rights to the city have informed government policies. Local governments have sought to rebalance the social mix of their cities for the purposes of spurring economic growth *and* enhancing civic life. Uitermark (2011) has shown that the Dutch government’s social mix and gentrification strategies aimed to enhance the civic and economic life of cities. Policy makers identified groups that were particularly beneficial to the city, designed environments that would attract them, and enacted policies that would discipline and displace less attractive groups. In a similar way, Raco (2007) has shown how local authorities in the United Kingdom associated incivility with an overconcentration of working class residents. In these and many other cases, the civic and economic lives of cities depended on attracting creative, responsible, active, and civil middle classes. Policies that made a place for a group with ‘positive’ cultural and economic attributes have been coupled with policies seeking restricting the possible spaces available for those lacking such attributes. “If certain groups are considered to be essential (or non-essential) to the make-up of a balanced or harmonious community then they need to be defined, identified and supported (or excluded) through specific policy measures” (Raco 2007: 309).

Municipal governments have sought to ‘gentrify’ their citizenry but they have also pursued strategies to gentrify ‘civic’ and associational life (Uitermark 2011). Community organizations, religious organizations, and other associations have assumed increased responsibility in enacting urban policies. This process however has not occurred in an ad hoc way. Local governments provide important levels of economic, political, and symbolic support for organizations that cohere with emergent neoliberal norms and goals. They privilege organizations that adhere to the values of the professional middle class in spirit and /or content. This results in what Uitermark calls “civic gentrification”. The Amsterdam government, for example, steered support away from working class immigrant associations and towards middle class minority associations in the 1990s. Rather than critiquing discrimination and pushing for social justice, these middle class associations stressed value of ‘diversity’ for the urban economy and the centrality of middle class virtues in minority communities. These associations framed the rights of minorities to the city of Amsterdam by highlighting the attributes that made minorities into good, responsible, and contributing members of economic and civic order of things. Civic gentrification is by no means limited to the Dutch case or minority associations. It has been responsible for remaking the content, goals, and operational norms of urban civil society in many European cities (Mayer 2001; Nicholls 2006; Raco 2007; Blakely 2010; Krueger and Buckingham 2012). The capacity to penetrate and steer the circuits of associational life has enhanced the government’s capacities to not only ‘coopt’ organizations and limit critique from the grassroots, but also to shape basic understandings concerning the rights, obligations, and moralities of the urban citizenry. As urban inhabitants come out and become active in the civic sphere, these organizations serve as the vehicles of their civic and political education. They teach newly activated inhabitants what constitutes legitimate rights to the city, who has the right to make rights claims, and what are the best methods to express rights claims in the political field. These civic organizations are therefore not only crucial in enacting government policies but also in shaping and constituting the political subjectivities of urban citizens (Rose 1999; Cruikshank 1999; Ong 1996).

Thus, neoliberal citizenship has come to shape the field of urban politics. This form of citizenship identifies the basis of legitimate rights, morals and norms associated with good citizens (creative, active, empowered, responsible, etc.), policies for maintaining a good citizenry (social mixing and class balancing), and methods for transmitting neoliberal norms into the circuits of civic life (civic gentrification). As the discourses and practices associated with neoliberal citizenship become adopted by more inhabitants and stakeholders, the more they are normalized and become the ‘commonsense’ of politics and policy in the city.

*Finding Openings and Developing Strategies in the Neoliberal-Creative City*

Within the context of neoliberal citizenship, contentious and critical activism by marginalized groups is constrained but not impossible. While opportunities are limited, these conditions do not shut down all possible avenues for critical political mobilizations. Political systems contain countless contradictions and such contradictions produce small cracks, fissures, and openings. Groups possessing the right set of attributes and resources can take advantage of these openings and press forward with their rights claims. These resources and attributes provide them with the leverage to engage in negotiations with local government officials (Pickerel and Chatterton 2006: 8). Organizations however lacking leverage may have greater difficulty resisting the co-optative and / or repressive powers of the government. They are more likely to either disappear or become relays of governmental power (Rose 1989).

Urban activists operate in a political field in which the precepts of neoliberal citizenship have become dominant if not hegemonic. Within such a context, activists draw upon the discourse of creativity to legitimate rights claims to the city (Pruijt 2003; Uitermark 2004; Shaw 2007; Vivant 2010; Holm and Kuhn 2011; Novy and Colomb 2012). The creativity discourse presents a definite constraint, but it also provides an opportunity for some urban activists (Harvey 2001a; 2002 in Novy and Colomb 2012: 6). Firstly, inter-urban competition contributes to a process of aesthetic homogenization. As cities have lost the distinctive aesthetic charms that once made them unique (Castells 1996), fostering a city’s cultural distinctiveness has increasingly become an important way to maintain a city’s attractiveness. Maintaining a vibrant culture is a means to maintain “a competitive edge and appropriate monopoly rents” (Novy and Colomb 2012: 6). Second, in this context, activist groups with access to cultural resources can use these as leverage in their negotiations with city officials. “The implication of this is that urban policy-makers around the world are now explicitly targeting the ‘off-beat’, ‘alternative’, and ‘underground’ subcultural and artistic sectors in their local economic development, place marketing strategies and urban policies” (Colomb, 2012: 143). City dependency on the cultural resources of activist groups provides the latter with the power to assert a claim of being rights deserving subject within this neoliberal and creative city.

While the creative turn creates openings for some activist groups, we argue that the extent of these openings varies dramatically across electoral districts and scales of government. Activists in possession of certain cultural resources may enjoy leverage but whether they can use this leverage to critically challenge the local government depends on specific political and discursive opportunities afforded to them within local electoral districts (e.g. boroughs, local councils, arrondissements, etc.) (Tarrow 1998; Koopmans and Statham 1999). In districts with elected officials not dependent on left-wing constituents and unreceptive to left-wing thought, activists have fewer allies in government to support their cause and have more trouble calling on support from the electorate to support their cause. As a consequence, activists cannot amplify their cultural leverage with locally embedded political resources and opportunities. In such instances, activists are likely to narrow their goals to simply staying in the city by producing cultural products that please government officials and the urban middle classes. We call this a strategy ‘political identification’. Such a strategy consists of crafting arguments, networks, and political groups that reinforce their own conformity with the governing goals and norms of the city. Claims to rights in this instance do not necessarily question or destabilize existing norms of urban rights and citizenship. Instead, the strategy aims to stress that the group *deserves* rights because of the group’s identification with established governing norms. They are good, responsible, and contributing members of the community and therefore it is only fair and just that they are accorded a right to the city.

By contrast, in political districts with elected officials dependent on a left-wing electorate and amenable to leftist discourses, activists are in a slightly better position to use their cultural attributes to challenge government policies and make broader political demands. The political and discursive opportunities found in such a context amplifies the leverage provided by their control over scarce cultural resources. Activists in such a context can pursue a strategy of ‘political in-betweenness’. Nourishing their credentials as both cultural producers and authentic left-wing activists enhances their capacities to maintain their relative autonomy *and* sustain their criticism of the given order of things. They have more room to make critical arguments against the government and they do not having to concern themselves with refashioning the group to bring it in closer alignment with dominant governing norms. Their opportunities and leveraging capacities allow them to maintain “one foot in” (engage in on-going negotiations with the government) and “one foot out” (engage in critical protests of certain government policies).

The creative resources of activists therefore provide them with some leverage to make their urban rights claims, but their strategies for making these claims vary by the political and discursive opportunities found in their local political districts. Actors in possession of creative resources have strategic resources to make rights claims in the neoliberal-creative city but these resources are not sufficient for ensuring their power. Within the same city, we can find similar activist groups with similar cultural resources pursuing very different strategies to assert their rights to the city. Whereas some groups can maintain a certain degree of autonomy, others internalize the discourses and norms of the governing regime and become important relays of governmental power in urban civil society (i.e. civic gentrification). These latter groups are able to stay open in the city but this comes at the cost of remaking themselves into a good, responsible, and creative citizen of the neoliberal city.

**II. Methods**

The activist groups under study on are the so-called *Wagenburgen* or trailer communities, which are located on squatted wastelands all over Berlin and consist of a number of wagons, trucks and mobile homes that are being used as permanent dwellings. These communities are not to be confused with gypsies or travelers, its members are part of the left-alternative (squatters) scene and their energy is directed towards forming free spaces where alternative economies and activities can be pursued. Within the broader activist milieu, trailer communities fulfill a slightly more ‘under-cover’ position compared to squatters of buildings; the former pursue their anti-capitalistic goals via strategies that to a certain extent correspond with the dominant creativity discourse, whereas the latter mainly make use of radical, critical action.

The first case that we studied was *Gesamtkünstwerk die Lohmühle*, located in the former conservative district of Treptow-Köpenick and grounded in 1991. It is the most well-known of all trailer communities, mainly due to its central location just south of *Görlitzerpark*, its longevity and the variety of events and activities that its members organize. The Lohmühle community is home to about twenty individuals who all built or arranged their own wagon and cohabitate in a well-organized manner. The reason why this place has been surviving neoliberal policies for over twenty years now is the fact that its inhabitants generally identify with the creativity discourse; everybody desiring to live at the Lohmühle is required to dedicate around half of their time towards organizing cultural events that are publicly accessible as a consequence.

*Laster & Hängerburg* began in 1996 as a loosely connected trailer community in Berlin’s district of Prenzlauerberg, but was evicted from the terrain they occupied in 2000 due to the zero-tolerance, conservative urban policy of that time. After having been forced to live on parking lots and the streets for almost a year, while continuously being chased and watched over by the police, the group found a terrain in left-wing Friedrichshain on which they were tolerated. This community pursues the ‘in-between’ strategy and houses about thirty people, of whom eleven are children and hosts a weekly communal dinner and film evening that is open to the public. This is the only concession with regard to the creativity discourse that is made by the activists; there are no accession restrictions or punitive policies for group making whatsoever.

We chose to compare these two, because we were interested in examining whether local political contexts would create significantly different strategies across trailer encampments in the city. Moreover, we wanted to find out about the scope of action inherent to left-wing activism in a thoroughly neoliberalized urban system.

One of the most challenging tasks in this research was to gain access to these mysterious urban enclaves. *Participant observation* in the form of voluntary work at various events at the encampments and one week of living in one of the trailers has been the most useful method to enter and capture the world of wagons. After access had been gained, seventeen *in-depth interviews* have been conducted with members of the trailer communities, supplemented with a *discourse analysis* on documents spread by activists (flyers, posters, badges, leaflets) and local newspaper articles. Participant observations and the open-ended interviews enabled us to detect micro practices that played a role in decision making, group making and identity formation processes in the trailer communities and the discourse analysis revealed the way the subjects of study presented themselves in the public sphere in order to gain a voice in politics on the one hand and uncovered the claims that activists made in interviews with the press on the other.

**III. Neoliberal-Creative Berlin: An overview of the political field**

*Constraints and opportunities*

Berlin has been governed by a “black-red coalition” (Christian-Democrats [CDU] and Social-Democrats [SPD]) since 2011.[[1]](#footnote-1) Both the center-right and center-left parties have largely accepted many of the core principles of competitive, neoliberal governance. Moreover, the Christian-Democrats have favored repressive positions regarding urban social movements. The CDU won the first common elections of unified Berlin in 1990 and went on to form a coalition with the SPD in 1991. The decade that followed presented trailer encampments with a particularly hostile environment because the government placed a ban on squatting. This repressive environment resulted in a sharp decline in squatting in general and it marked an important constraint on the trailer camps in particular. The only legal option to live on urban land was to buy a site or lease it from the borough and purchasing private property was not an option for the majority of trailer communities. 2001 marked an important turning point with the establishment of a Social-Democrat and Left Party coalition which lasted until 2011. This provided a more hospitable environment for urban activists generally.

While the government shifted to the left in the 2000s, Berlin’s massive long-term debt bound it to the previous government’s economic policies. As of 2013, the city continues to have a debt of almost 61 million euros[[2]](#footnote-2). The city has embraced policies to stimulate new sources of revenue and it has also sought to privatize ‘vacant’ municipal lands. In 2001, the city council established the *‘Liegenschaftsfonds’* (‘property-fund’), which was aimed at selling ‘vacant’ urban land that was not included in zoning plans. Local districts could sell lands to the city of Berlin and the city could then resell those lands to private investors. For local district officials in need of revenue, this provided an important opportunity to identify and sell off strategic lands in their jurisdictions. The *Liegenschaftsfonds* has also made the city into a land entrepreneur in its own right. It employs its authority to buy lands at a reduced cost, assemble and deliver these lands to private markets, and employ its leverage to maximize the returns on its investment. In addition to providing the city with new revenue, this process has created strong incentive for district and city officials to privatize properties and prioritize private property rights. This increased the pressures on the trailer encampments by reducing the physical space available for them while also undermining the legitimacy of claims based on collective property rights. Claims to collective property rights in other words lose resonance in a context when collective property rights have no legal or normative legitimacy.

Political officials in Berlin have also embraced the creativity discourse and agenda since the 2000s. Authorities have created projects - like *Projekt Zukunft*[[3]](#footnote-3) and the network ‘CREATE BERLIN’ - that aim to promote the creativity of the city (Lange et. al. 2008: 536). Berlin’s city council also launched a website that promotes the city as a powerful, creative hub: “Berlin is the epicentre of power and yet symbolic of freedom and autonomy, hosting *both high art and counterculture*”[[4]](#footnote-4). The mayor of the city explains the economic rationality for embracing the creativity strategy, “Berlin has to be the city of talents. We want to be attractive for creative people from scientific, cultural and economic fields. […] My goal is to make Berlin into one of the top addresses for the creatives of the world in the next five years, because they bring along growth and employment accordingly. […] Visitors should become inhabitants!” (Klaus Wowereit, in Ebert and Kunzmann 2007: 65). This mayor has played an influential part in the ‘creatification’ of Berlin (Lange et. al. 2008: 535). According to one source, “voters credited him with enhancing Berlin’s image as hip, tolerant, cultural city [...] and under his watch the city has increasingly become a magnet for artists, fashion designers, writers and high-profile exhibitions” (*Der Spiegel*, 2006).

The prominence of the creativity discourse and agenda has provided a small but important opportunity for alternative urban movements because they are recognized as key contributions to the city’s ‘hip’ culture (Vivant 2010). Berlin’s city council uses the slogan “Berlin: poor but sexy” and states that “it’s precisely this mixture of established cultural institutions and experimental alternative scenes that accounts for the *special charm* of Berlin’s cultural landscape.”[[5]](#footnote-5) According to an official with the Green Party in the Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg district, the Berlin squatter movement has contributed in important ways to the popularity of the city, “Some parties apparently still have not quite understood that the attractiveness of Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg is inherent to the alternative projects and forms of living that reside here” (Antje Kapek, Green Party Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg).[[6]](#footnote-6)

Neoliberal Berlin has privatized land, accelerated property speculation, and celebrated the creative qualities of the city and its residents. While activists in trailer encampments have faced eviction pressures, they have asserted that they have been important contributors to creating an attractive, hip, and buzzy urban culture:

We as a trailer community contribute to the image of Berlin. People come to Friedrichshain, also because there are trailer places. […] We organize non-commercial events, so that we can say: ‘This *Platz* is public and it brings something good for the neighbours.’ That is also what we believe to be a reason: We are a tourist attraction, because the tourists are so integrated in the district that they belong here (Amara, Laster and Hängerburg resident, personal interview)

Politicians and trailer camp residents recognize the importance of encampments for generating the alternative ‘*Berliner Szene’.*

*The unevenness of the local opportunity structure*

As of 1 January 2001, Berlin’s urban administration was reclassified: the former twenty three districts were fused into twelve districts, each with five councillors (*Bezirksstadträte*) and a district mayor (*Bezirksbürgermeister*). The residents of the district vote for the district assembly (*Bezirksverordnetenversammlung*) which in turn selects the district council. The division of Berlin into twelve smaller political districts provides important opportunities in areas with high concentrations of activists and sympathetic left-wing constituents. Whereas city-wide elections dilute the electoral weight of smaller and more radical political groups, district based elections provide opportunities because the geographical concentration of groups provides them with greater influence and electoral weight.



Fig. 1 The division of districts in Berlin as of January 2001 (http://www.dickes-b-an-der-spree.de, accessed 18-01-2013)

The district of Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg counted 274,386 inhabitants in 2012[[7]](#footnote-7) and constitutes the vibrant heart of the left-alternative scene, housing many of the squats and trailer communities in Berlin. The Green Party, led by Mayor Frans Schülz, is the most influential party in the district assembly and forms a coalition with the Social-Democrats (*SPD*). The third and fourth largest parties are the Left Party (*Bündnis ’90 / Die Linke*) and the Pirate Party. Facing competitive pressures from its left-flank, the governing coalition of the district is compelled to maintain its left-wing credentials in this district. This political climate suggests that the district of Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg is a more hospitable environment for urban activists than other more conservative districts of Berlin. Schülz has expressed strong support for alternative living and deems the trailer communities to be enriching the cultural and economic life of the district. “We got this place [land for the trailer encampment] thanks to the mayor of Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg: Schülz from the Green Party. The police was outside of the gate, but then he said: ‘Let them stay here for now’ (André, Laster and Hängerburg resident, personal interview).

The district of Treptow-Köpenick has a more conservative political tradition. The district assembly now consists of a coalition between Social-Democrats (*SPD*) and the Left Party *(Bündnis ’90 / Die Linke).* Conservative Christian-Democrats had dominated the district until 2011 and remain a competitive political force. This history presented squats and trailer encampments with a more inhospitable political context. The Lohmühle trailer camp in Treptow-Köpenick had greater difficulty asserting its legitimacy within this district. Political leaders were less receptive to countercultural movements, and such movements had also not achieved a critical mass in the district. In contrast to Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg, the squatting movement and culture was very marginal in Treptow. The Lohmühle activists were acting as relatively isolated pioneers in this district and therefore had to create support among the residents of the district as well as convince elected officials that they were not a threat to the community but instead a contributor to its growth and continued vitality.

**IV. The Strategy of Identification: The case of the Lohmühle Trailer Camp**

The Lohmühle is the oldest trailer camp in Berlin and is located in Treptow-Köpenick. The membership of the Lohmühle trailer camp has undergone a dramatic change during its twenty year existence. In the early days, members were mostly interested in sustaining its radical and alternative political spirit. The eclectic makeup of the community and particular vision of political struggle resulted in tense relations with the surrounding area. Neighbours complained about loud music, waste, barking dogs, and drunken stragglers. In this context, elected officials viewed the trailer camp as a nuisance and threat to neighborhood stability. Officials threatened the camp with eviction on multiple occasions between 1992 and 1997. It was at this point that the activists realized that their failure to create resonance with district politicians and residents made them vulnerable to eviction. This precipitated a shift in their strategy.

The Lohmühle has continued its efforts to challenge capitalist consumer society. It has done this by promoting alternative living practices based on the principles of collectivism, sustainability, and experimental cultural production. Residents have sought to create a space that serves as an incubator for alternative ways of living, producing, and consuming. They believe that the capitalist system is at its limits and alternatives are needed for a better world. While Lohmühle views itself as anti-establishment political space in the city, it also operates in a traditionally conservative district of neoliberal Berlin. Its abilities to continue its existence as a viable political space has required it to pursue a strategy of political identification. It justifies its urban rights by stressing its economic contribution to the city. It has also fostered support networks among the gentrifying middle class residents and it has selected camp residents that conform to dominant norms and expectations. In this way, the strategy to stay in the city has resulted in an active role of making camp residents into citizens who cohere with dominant neoliberal-creative norms.

*Argument: Good contributors to the neoliberal-creative city*

Lohmühle residents claim to enrich the cultural realm by organizing a wide array of events (e.g. exhibition wagon, kids creativity workshop, jazz concerts, punk concerts, communal dinners [*Vokü*], ecological tours, seminars, theatre shows, dance cafés, a street festival, a flea market, a poetry festival, documentary nights, etc.). Their rights claims are directly tied to their abilities to produce cultural services in the city. According to Lohmühle’s so-called mayor, their argument rests on three basic claims:

The first claim holds that a dynamic and creative city needs experimental spaces that are publicly accessible. In order for these spaces to retain their experimental and innovative qualities, they need to retain their informality and operate with low financial costs. When a trailer encampment has high financial costs, it is forced to enter the commercial sector which in turn undermines the experimental character of the space. Commercialization would require members of the trailer camps to reach a broad market which would in turn reduce their capacities to experiment:

A city that wants to be worth living in needs experimental places that are publicly accessible and where something is created for the public. It is necessary that a *Platz* that is run in an experimental manner has low financial charges. When the financial charges are high, it has to enter the commercial, with all the consequences. That uncannily reduces the free space that I have for experiments, because I am just chasing money (Kuno, Lohmühle encampment, personal interview).

If the city wants to sustain the experimental qualities that make Berlin culturally unique, it must protect cultural producers like the Lohmühle from nefarious market forces.

The second claim is that the district saves money because camp residents work voluntarily, musicians perform for free, and the camp receives no municipal subsidies. They provide critical cultural services at no charge to the city. “Another cultural project would be subsidized with 100,000 euros. The project here refuses subsidies and sets up the collective organization voluntarily. That's the best thing that can happen to a municipality. They save an immense amount of money this way” (Kuno, Lohmühle encampment, personal interview). Whereas a formal enterprise would cost a bankrupt city enormous resources, the Lohmühle and similar groups allow the city to retain its cultural edge at a very low cost. If the city closed down these underground producers, they would then have to pay market value for cultural services or risk losing Berlin’s competitive cultural advantage.

Lastly, Lohmühle residents assert that their cultural work stimulates the economy by attracting tourists to Berlin. They are strategic contributors to the creative underground cityscape that draw tourists from around the world to Berlin and the district:

The district office is very much interested in our organizing of cultural events, it is our main task. We will continue doing that and many tourists will visit the events as well. Because of course, the district is interested in the fact that there is an attractive range of activities for tourists in Berlin. Tourists bring a lot of money in the city. The Berlin Senate thinks it is important that Berlin keeps its image of underground city in the future, simply because it raises money and the city needs money. This is a reason why we survived on this piece of land: because we fitted perfectly in this underground concept (Kuno, Lohmühle encampment, personal interview).

The leader of the Lohmühle is very conscious of the importance of cultural production for making Berlin a major tourist destination. The city needs to support his group’s activities in order to maintain its positioning in global tourist markets.

Thus, resident-activists in the Lohmühle encampment consciously view their relation with the city and their rights to the city in utilitarian terms. They *deserve* a right to the city because they furnish the city with key cultural services that add directly to the city’s economic bottom line. They produce cultural events in exchange for access to land.[[8]](#footnote-8) “Essentially, it's the service on return: We don't pay any rent, but therefore we have to work here for a certain amount of hours and in this way we work for our rent so to say. And that amount of money is being written in the district's budget as cultural expense" (Emmy, Lohmühle encampment, personal interview). Residents are aware that their right to stay in the city depends on fulfilling cultural obligations. “When we would not want to organize cultural events anymore, the district office would definitely want us to pack our stuff and leave. We have to provide something for the neighbourhood when we want to stay here, because this site is not just a site. It is a site in the inner-city, which is situated on the waterfront, it is highly sought after”(Kuno, Lohmühle encampment, personal interview). The city and the Lohmühle are therefore bound to one another in a mutually beneficial transaction: middle class citizens from the surrounding neighbourhood can enjoy the cultural services indirectly sponsored by the district, while the camp residents benefit from living on a green and central site which enables them to spread their alternative ways of living.

*Networks: Building supporting among the gentrifying middle class*

Developing good relations with the residents of the district is a central part of the general strategy. They position themselves as good neighbors that contribute essential resources to a flourishing neighborhood. Resident-activists conceive of the *Platz* as an open and common space that needs to be made available to the broader community. Rather than closing themselves off from their neighbors, opening themselves to their surroundings allows them to connect to neighbors, perform key neighborhood functions, and build lasting political support in the district. Support from the district’s middle class residents can be used as additional leverage in their negotiations with political officials.

The first step in this direction was made in the end of the nineties when the camp sought to improve its image by changing the name from ‘trailer fortress Lohmühle’ (*Wagenburg die Lohmühle*) to ‘Communal Artwork Lohmühle’ (*Gesamtkünstwerk die Lohmühle*). They sought to shed the stigma typically attributed to ‘trailer fortresses.’ The aim was to create a strong association with art and cultural events rather than squatting, punk music, and partying. Lohmühlians also made the encampment accessible 24 hours a day and created clear paths to provide pedestrians access from all sides. This policy of openness was aimed at breaking down prejudices by giving people the opportunity to experience life inside the trailer community.Two trailers have also been made available for guests. Guests can request to stay in one of them and experience what it is like to live in the trailer community. A playground for children has been constructed in the middle of the terrain, which is often used by neighborhood families and children. These practices are aimed at showing that the encampment is not something apart from the urban community but a contributing element of the common and collective life of the neighborhood. “Why is it good that the place is open and public? Because it gives a legitimation that we can be here, it is a very big site and it doesn't belong to me and I'd like to share it with people." (Anna, Lohmühle encampment, personal interview).

While the Lohmühle holds many events that attract area residents, certain events have become very popular in Treptow. During the summer, the Lohmühle organizes jazz concerts on a bimonthly basis. Each event is attended by approximately four hundred people. Most visitors are (upper) middle class residents of the district and are not members of Berlin’s left-alternative scene. The discrepancy between these two lifestyles is very apparent during the events, but it is not an issue for the visitors. They drink beer out of the bottle, use the same wineglass multiple times, go to the wooden toilet that does not flush, and sit on dusty plastic chairs. Many feel amazed by the romantic and bohemian atmosphere that the *Platz* radiates at night. The residents of the Lohmühle also do their best to be good hosts for the jazz-public by dressing up and being extra friendly. Many of the camp residents are not fond of jazz or of the people their events attract but they recognize importance of the concerts for their legitimacy and survival in the city.

Lohmühle also holds an annual summer festival which has replaced the ‘neighborhood street festival’. This event has become an important part of neighborhood life. It provides an opportunity for neighbors to connect to one another in an enjoyable and culturally hip environment. This helps to produce a neighborhood identity associated with Berlin’s countercultural feel. For many middle class gentrifiers, this identity is an important part of their own stock of cultural capital. Living in a place with a ‘hip’ identity and reputation contributes to their own status position, giving them a direct interest in supporting this and other Lohmühle events. Neighbours meet at the *Platz,* interact with one another at events, and develop a common sense of identity that is integrally linked to the Lohmühle. The Lohmühle in this instance becomes a major support within the neighborhood, providing a space for both socializing and nourishing a strong place identity. By making themselves indispensable to the broader neighborhood, Lohmühle builds strong support among the neighbors. This support makes it politically difficult for district officials to threaten the Lohmühle with eviction.

In addition to reaching out directly to neighbours, the Lohmühle also has fostered good relations with reporters and producers of the Berlin press. These good relations allow the Lohmühle to attract and shape media coverage of their most important events. It also allows the leaders of the camp to frame how the media presents the camp to the wider public. Good media relations allow them to steer how the media actually represents the camp and its events to the broader public. Positive representations of the trailer camp improve their image in the public imagination. Lohmühle residents were able to resist evictions in 1997 and 2011 because of positive press coverage and publicity and supportive residents.

Lastly, Lohmühle residents make an effort to reach out to elected officials of the district. Politicians are personally invited to have a look at the site or visit one of the events. Members of political parties are approached personally by the activists. At the *Platz,* politicians are welcomed with coffee and cake and get an opportunity to adjust their image of trailer communities. The invitations are aimed at creating a relation of trust with politicians. The politicians have to be convinced of the reliability of the residents. Most politicians in Treptow-Köpenick have developed a positive impression of the Lohmühle and appreciate its activities in the neighborhood. This resulted in district officials extending the lease-contract of the Lohmühle by five years in 2011.

These efforts have contributed to changing public perceptions of the camp. The Lohmühle is sometimes referred to as the ‘the petting zoo’ (*Streichelzoo)* of the Berlin trailer communities because they have the reputation of being the most open to the public. The image of fear and negativity that stuck to trailer communities in the eighties and nineties has been replaced by a positive, warm and inviting picture. They know that some elected officials have problems with the spirit of the trailer encampment and its use of valuable urban space, but they also know that broad support from the middle, creative class protect them from evictions from public lands. This strategy is reflected in the creed of the camp: “*The relation with the district is good when the relation with the neighbours is good*.”

Efforts to broaden beyond the original base have required them to produce cultural products that satisfy the tastes of the upper middle class. In the past they only catered to likeminded people who shared their own musical taste (mainly punk). Residents came to acknowledge that this one-sided focus would not help them build support in the inhospitable environment of Treptow. They learned that they had to look beyond their own preferences and produce cultural products and services that targeted the tastes of the broader (middle class) public. The program was subsequently extended to offer more varied music. Jazz in particular was added to the program and grew to become the largest magnet for visitors. This did not mean that the initial, more radical activities and cultural practices were abandoned. They exist side by side with those catering their more bourgeois neighbors. “You have to make sacrifices and compromises, that is important, but you should not lose your identity in the meantime. I can still organize punk concerts. I can also organize critical political events on my *Platz*. That is not the problem. The only thing is, you have to give away a part of the place to others” (Kuno, Lohmühle encampment, personal interview)

*Group Making: Selecting ‘good’ members, silencing ‘deviants*

During the 1990s, the Lohmühle community consisted of an array of people including students, punks, political activists, ‘hippies’, etc. The important strategic changes described above prompted changes in the makeup of the community and the adoption of internal disciplinary measures. This has contributed to increasing the middle class composition of the community. The general process has resulted in what Uitermark called ‘civic gentrification’. The leaders of Lohmühle began to recruit new members in the 2000s while slowly weeding out deviant types. University educated and middle class newcomers embraced the strategy of remaking the trailer encampment into a center of creative cultural activities.

The process of selecting good members and weeding out problematic ones has been ongoing. The norms of creativity and openness are core criteria for selecting new members. The fact that the Lohmühle has been successful for ten years makes it a secure place to live. This has increased its popularity as a place to live, with many people seeking out residency and membership in the community. This results in the need to develop strict criteria to select the ‘best’ people. Candidates have to be creative (which means he or she can pitch ideas or is willing to help execute the ideas of others), willing to dedicate a substantive part of his or her time to the events taking place at the Lohmühle (this comes down to about twenty hours a week), and he or she has to be able to get along with the other residents. “It's like this that everyone who moves here has to agree on the fact that this is an open, public cultural project. That is the basis of the project and everybody knows that” (Anna, Lohmühle resident, personal interview). This statement illustrates the drift in the community’s political norms. Culture and openness were viewed by the older residents (especially the ‘mayor’) as a *means* to maintain an activist space in a difficult political environment. The newer generation perceives culture and openness as *ends* in their own right. The political and radical vocations of the camp have faded to a background ethos while its cultural and civic virtues have been pushed to the fore.

The selection process is intensive and can last several weeks. During the fieldwork, the co-author encountered a woman who was being considered for membership at the Lohmühle. During the selection process, the candidate lived in one of the guest trailers and participated in activities and events. She felt that she had to prove that she was a suitable member of the community. The difficulty of gaining membership, according to this candidate, was because the Lohmühle was part of the exclusive and underground *Berliner Szene*. Members of the Lohmühle community, however, offer different reasons for the strict selection process. New residents needed to demonstrate their willingness to contribute to cultural events because of their agreement with the borough:

You could say that the events and the culture that is being made here, has actually become the legitimation here. It has grown like that. We don’t pay any rent or lease. The district decides on an amount of money, which they would actually like to have as rent for the site. This sum is booked in the budget as cultural expense. Like 'Furtherance Trailer Fortress Lohmühle. This is the deal and it formally obligates everybody who lives here to do cultural work. So a certain amount of time per month (Emmy, Lohmühle member, personal interview).

This remark reveals how the selection of future members is tied to their abilities to perform cultural work for the city. The city expects a certain amount of hours dedicated to cultural work and services. As a consequence, new residents should be people that are willing and able to produce cultural events and products geared to middle and upper class tastes. Candidates who can show good aptitude for cultural production are therefore given priority, reinforcing the internal gentrification of the group.

‘Problematic people’ are viewed as those failing to contribute sufficiently to the cultural work of the community. Their inability to be active contributors makes them vulnerable to losing their right to stay in the Lohmühle community:

Yeah there are some, who somehow lately… Either because they live here for a very long time already and simply are a little bit washed-out or that their second child is on its way or other reasons… are not willing or in the position to give priority to the project here. This is just exhausting but it will change (Emmy, Lohmühle encampment, personal interview).

As the Lohmühle community has assumed more responsibility in producing cultural events in the area, those members who cannot contribute because of their age or children are viewed as a drag on the community and therefore eligible for removal.

Concerted efforts have also been made to exert discipline over the discourses and conduct of the members. There has been a conscious effort to steer and control public messaging. They have encouraged members to stop using the term *trailer fortress* (*Wagenburg*) which has been stigmatized in Berlin. Instead, they self-identify as the “Communal Artwork the Lohmühle” (*Gesamtkünstwerk die Lohmühle).* The members of the community were also encouraged to talk in a way that would highlight the artistic nature of the camp and shun its origins as a trailer fortress with deep roots in Berlin’s squatting past. Gradually, the Lohmühle was perceived as a cultural project and the openness and accessibility of the place started to resonate in the minds of the Berlin citizens. Lohmühle members want to draw attention to those aspects that cohere best with the normative expectations of political officials and the broader middle class.

But putting out a good ‘front stage’ representation of themselves and their activities requires them to silence more problematic aspects of their group. The Lohmühle has disciplined the conduct and discourses of its members. Four basic rules were set up to govern the conduct of the camp: Volume down at night, no waste, no violence and no hard drugs. These rules were introduced due to pressure from the surrounding environment. Those members who failed to follow these rules were removed from the community. These rules helped to provide the community with better methods to identify and weed out deviants. This contributed to strengthening a core group of members willing to follow the new strategy and marginalizing and weakening the dissenters. In addition to creating and enforcing basic rules, the Lohmühle has adopted a decision making process through ‘plenums’. These are weekly meetings where affairs and plans for the future are discussed and decisions are made collectively. Some Lohmühlians believe that the control of the plenum and the consensus model are absolute and marginalize alternative views.

**V. The Strategy of In-Betweenness: The Laster and Hängerburg Encampment**

The trailer community of Laster and Hängerburg (L&H) is situated in the reasonably tolerant and leftist district of Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg. In this context, there is less need for L&H residents to develop the complex legitimation strategies described above. Moreover, the availability of rich activist networks in this district allows L&H residents to draw upon them when threated with eviction. The scarcity of activist networks in the more conservative Treptow-Köpenick district has made this strategy difficult for Lohmühle residents. L&H residents have therefore developed a two-prong strategy consisting of asserting cultural contributions to Berlin *and* mobilizing support from the left-alternative scene.

*The Argument: Good contributors but still radical*

The first part of L&H’s strategy builds upon Berlin’s efforts to capitalize on its underground subcultural scene to attract tourists. This part of the strategy is consistent with the Lohmühle, but it is executed with less intensity. The principal claim is that L&H residents deserve a right to occupy a site because they offer important cultural services. They argue that their services and events reinforce Berlin’s subcultural reputation and feel, which in turn attracts tourists to the city and to the Friedrichshain district. Activists and left-wing politicians argue that tourists visit this district partly because of the presence of trailer communities that open up the local subculture to the broader public. They provide an opportunity for strolling tourists to get a more direct feel of this hip and underground culture. Their rights to this place in the city is made on the strict grounds that they sustain one of Berlin’s most important tourist attractions: its underground culture. They deserve a right to the city because they contribute to the city’s economic growth.

L&H residents perform their cultural services by organizing a weekly, publicly accessible dinner held on Wednesdays. The meal consists of a high-quality, three course communal dinner (*Vokü)* that can be enjoyed for two to three euro. Everyone picks up a plate and cutlery, pays at the counter, gets the food from the kitchen and finds a seat at one of the tables or benches around the fireplace. Drinks can be bought at the counter and afterwards guests are expected to wash their own plates. At dusk, a free film or documentary is presented on a big screen and sometimes a singer-songwriter performs. These events are popular, with an average of sixty to seventy people in regular attendance. They draw diverse visitors including squatters, tourists, activist friends, and neighbours. L&H residents explicitly use the tourist visits to support their arguments that they are contributing to the industry.

While the weekly dinner events constitute their core activities, the L&H[[9]](#footnote-9) also organizes an array of workshops on regenerative energy, lessons in arts and crafts with recycled materials, tango courses and a children’s circus. These various workshops are ways in which the activists use culture as a way to achieve legitimacy among the politicians and neighbors in the district. By providing knowledge and culture for the surrounding population, L&H residents are able to make the claim that they have something to offer to the city. “We as a trailer community are part of the city and we contribute to the image that Berlin has. People come to Friedrichshain because there are trailer communities. They can't visit them intensively, but there is a public day, this Vokü Wednesday. *We organize non-commercial events, so that we can say: ‘This Platz is public and it brings something good for the neighbours’*" (Amara, L&H resident, personal interview).

One part of the strategy stresses their contribution as creative producers while the other part depends on mobilizing Berlin’s left-alternative scene in times of political difficulty. When eviction pressure increases, allies and friends in the left-alternative scene are reached through email and social media, flyers, posters and by word of mouth. The *Vokü* and film night also functions as a way of keeping in touch with members of the scene. Although this urban movement scene seems quite fragmented, L&H manages to reach enough people to pursue their goals. Solidarity has a high priority in the left-alternative scene and different branches are connected by informal contact which can be activated in times of need. These mobilizations are impressive because they comprise about two to three hundred people, often dressed in extremely colourful or dramatic black clothes. “By stressing their numbers, they bring across the message: ‘You decide upon us and our friends and we are with many, so consider it well’…” (Josef, L&H ally, personal interview). The recent effort to evict L&H and replace it with a sports facility has been postponed indefinitely. The successful use of mobilizations has reinforced efforts to maintain good contacts with left allies in the district and beyond.

*Networks: Building supporting to the public and to local activists*

In the context of neoliberalizing Berlin, the Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg district provides social movements with favorable conditions. The Green Party in Friedrichshain and Mayor Schultz produce favorable discourses and provide multiple channels for connecting activists to elected officials. Moreover, the strength of a left constituency and competition from left parties place additional pressures on district officials. This has reduced the need by L&H residents to take aggressive steps to curry the favor of district residents and elected officials. There is one member of the L&H community who takes care of the contacts with the district. The networking strategy is far less developed than the strategy of the Lohmühle.

L&H has been fortunate because it is relatively isolated and has no direct neighbors. Complaints concerning noise and nuisances are rare. The site is adjacent to a kindergarten. While they originally had an unfriendly relation with L&H, the employees changed their view when they noticed that L&H contributed to a substantial decrease in burglary rates. Furthermore, inhabitants of Friedrichshain are accustomed to the presence of the left-alternative scene. The semi-openness of the space has provided residents of the district with an opportunity to visit and develop a positive image of life in the trailer camp. This diminishes prejudice and negative stigmas associated with the site, which has contributed to better relations between the L&H residents and the residents of the district.

L&H does not consciously network with the press. It only reaches out to the press during the relatively rare occasions when it is threatened with eviction. During such occasions a press campaign is set up which consists of inviting journalists from magazines and newspapers to perform interviews and take photographs of the camp. Activists have learned from experience that the tone press coverage tends to be more positive when journalists are invited to the camp than when they come on their own. Lately, L&H’s weak press strategy has resulted in two negative articles in 2012. This has been viewed by some residents as a potential problem but there is no real pressing concern to develop a well thought-out press strategy like that found at the Lohmühle. The relatively hospitable political context and their strong connections to local activists have reduced the sharp need to take an active role in shaping public and political perceptions of their camp. They engage in such activities but it is not viewed as central to their survival.

*Group Making: A loose community*

There is less concerted effort to construct a strong and disciplined group. This is again largely a function of the particular context they find themselves in. According to one resident, the central rule is to not enforce many rules, “Our dogma is to be undogmatic” (Wande, L&H encampment, personal interview). The L&H community consists of individuals who are very free in deciding to what extent they contribute to their own community. Some activists even go as far to say that there is no such thing as a community at L&H at all, but that they just live on the same terrain. "We live together, we throw ourselves together and mobilize when it is needed and we also think that everybody lives their own life. That is the way things go around here, because..you know.. There is no such thing as a community here" (Gretchen, L&H encampment, personal interview). Also, when compared to the Lohmühle, there is a weak organization and informal decision making process. "There is no joint discussion, which I like: every individual can do what he wants” (Axel, L&H encampment, personal interview). Members contribute what they like and tasks are not formally assigned. The daily affairs run fairly smoothly, thanks to the principle of ‘everybody makes his or her contribution’.

The L&H community has not imposed disciplinary measures because its location in a left-wing district provides it with other tools (mobilization capacities) to exercise influence and defend its rights claims in the city. The loosely tied structure of the group of activists is reflected in the absence of a fixed plenum and explicit rules and regulations. Since the prevailing “dogma” is to be undogmatic, the *Platz* is home to people who identify with an unregulated, uncontrolled, and individualistic lifestyle. They are not particularly concerned with convincing others of the righteousness of their approach, but more concerned with withdrawing from the consumer society of which they are critics. Plenums are only held when threatened by eviction.

The undogmatic philosophy resonates in how the community is constructed. Unlike the Lohmühle, there are not strict criteria for joining or periods of examination. Everybody who wants to join is free to do so, as long as there is space and a trailer available. If any member of the group is bothered by the newcomer and no solution is found, the newcomer is asked to leave the community. This flexibility in community making and control reflects the lack of interest in complicated disciplinary techniques. The only consistent ways in which they discipline themselves is through weekly communal dinners and film demonstrations. Residents have to serve drinks, prepare a meal, and ensure supplies for their guests. This is also the principal event held that allows them to make the claim that they are important creative contributors to the district and the city. Unlike Lohmühle, however, their events are consistent with their own tastes (vegan food, political documentaries, etc.) as much as those of the broader middle class. They do not produce cultural events (e.g. jazz concerts) that they themselves do not enjoy. Residents produce events that are very pleasurable for themselves and where they can socialize with friends and newcomers in what they consider to be a nice setting.

Their informal organizational structure and lack of disciplinary controls reduces their will and capacities to mount high profile public campaigns. L&H residents have not developed a sophisticated press strategy and they put minimal energy into creating a favorable public image. This becomes more of a priority during anti-eviction campaigns. Such moments result in spontaneous, powerful, and explosive mobilizations that draw on their networks from the left-alternative scene. According to the monthly journal *Tagesspiegel[[10]](#footnote-10),* L&H has a growing image problem that finds its roots in the increasing number of residents considered ‘bourgeois-bohemians’. The main reason for this image is that many residents have jobs outside of the *Platz*. Whether or not this image is realistic, the statement has been made, gained publicity, and formed a discourse that resonates among certain civil groups and can be used against it by politicians. Nevertheless, L&H residents are not very concerned with managing, influencing, or controlling their public image. At the time of this study, they began to make a slight effort in this direction by updating their website and emphasizing cultural events, vegetable gardens, and their use of sustainable energy.

CONCLUSION:

The creative and cultural turn in urban policy provides activist groups with cultural capital small openings and some leverage to make rights claims in the city. However, the extent of these openings and the leverage activists can deploy within them depends on the political-discursive contexts activists find themselves in. This can result in sharply different ‘cultural’ strategies by similar kinds of activist groups. Our study identifies two such strategies pursued by trailer encampments in Berlin. The encampment in the conservative district pursued a strategy of political and discursive identification. It represented itself in ways that largely conformed to the dominant discourse of neoliberal, creative Berlin. The camp also sought to create connections to the urban middle class through specially targeted events and other outreach efforts. Lastly, it also remade the group to conform to this strategic line, selecting residents on the basis of cultural attributes and disciplining them to play according to the rules of the game. The strategy of identification has resulted in a certain gentrification of the encampment, with its acts, words, and members contributing directly to making the city an attractive place for hip middle class residents and tourists. By contrast, the encampment in the left district has been less threatened by elected officials and enjoyed greater support by left-wing activists in the district. Such a context has allowed them to employ an ‘in-between’ strategy. They stress their important contribution to the cultural makeup of the Berlin scene but they do so with less effort. They have not felt compelled to remake themselves into upstanding, good, and deserving citizens of neoliberal, creative Berlin.

The use of culture and creativity as a basis for making rights claims raises an important dilemma for all activists. Stressing their cultural capital and providing cultural services provides them with some leverage to stay in the city. More radical claims and discourses in increasingly neoliberal cities would largely be dismissed as the “noise” of an irrational and extreme mob rather the “voice” of a legitimate political subject (Dikeç 2004).

“The creativity discourse appears effective for squatters to gain legitimacy to sustain the occupation, while the political anti-speculative discourse is too radical” (Vivant 2010: 129). However, when activists use the language of creativity and stress their unique cultural attributes, their status as *deserving* members of the urban community stems from their abilities to make a contribution to the competitive and neoliberal city. While this discourse enables them to fight for their group’s right to stay in the city, using it reproduces the idea that rights should be accorded to those who can contribute their high stocks of cultural capital to making Berlin into a thriving and attractive cultural center. Those who have good taste and can produce ‘good’ culture therefore have a greater right to the city than those who don’t. As this strategy becomes more successful, more activists are likely to adopt. This elevates culture to a central theme for making claims to urban citizenship. This does not only help reproduce the creative city discourse, but it also crowds out other discursive strategies to justify rights claims such as social justice, equality, and basic human rights. For people lacking established forms of cultural capital, their abilities to gain legitimacy for their rights claims is further undermined as the rights to the city becomes tied to cultural contributions. The poor, low-skilled working classes, migrants, elderly, and other groups lack the cultural capital needed to make legitimate rights claims. Unless these groups can reframe themselves as culturally astute contributors to a city’s hip and edgy underground scene, they will have difficulty asserting their own right to stay and thrive in these cities.

Thus, highlighting ‘creativity’ has been indispensable in securing a right to the city. Without deploying this discourse, the residents of the encampment would have likely been evicted from their spaces. But this line of argument has also reproduced the neoliberal rationality that rights should be attributed to those who contribute to the creative economic order. Radicals may even debate what constitutes true ‘creativity’ but they have increasingly seen themselves and their position through the lens of creativity. This does not only help to reproduce the basic parameters of neoliberal citizenship but it also crowds out the claims of people lacking the cultural capital to make legitimate rights claims. We suggest that this is a fairly pressing dilemma for many activist communities because the path to gaining recognition as rights deserving subjects in the city depends on reproducing the dominant rationality and contributing to the exclusion of ‘less deserving’, less creative urban inhabitants.

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3. www.berlin.de/projektzukunft (accessed 04-01-2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. www.be.berlin.de (accessed 11-01-2013, emphasis added) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. www.be-berlin.de, accessed 8-1-2012, emphasis added [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. From the website of the Green Party (http://www.frieke.de/suchen/2398542.html?searchshow=wagen, accessed 06-03-2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Residents of the Lohmühle pay an amount of 15 euro a month per person, which includes land tax, garbage collection services and snow removal costs. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. (http://www.lasterundhaengerburg.de/pages/veranstaltungen.php, accessed 22-1-2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Tagesspiegel*, 24 February 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)