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Photos: Rebecca Solfrian

FUN TIME WITH BAD MONEY. A tool-kit for changing a neighbourhood?

– Interview with Rebecca Solfrian from Coopolis in Berlin

WWW.COOPOLIS.DE

Linnalabor gathered its forces and made a trip to Berlin to see what's behind and beyond the tales of that mysterious city. Staying at a former squat on Kreuzigerstraße (see also Triin Pitsi's text) U happened to meet Rebecca Solfrian from Coopolis, an organisation that started from the idea of supporting temporary uses in houses that are empty and ended up being one of the triggers in changing then derelict Neukölln neighbourhood into a vibrant area with active community life that it is now.

U asked Rebecca how it was done, and this is what she said.

EXPOSITION: NEUKÖLLN

U: What is Coopolis, how did it start, and how does it work?

Rebecca Solfrian: It is a small office in **Neukölln**, consisting of a group of architects, city planners, geographers and people from related disciplines. It was started in 2006 by two women inspired by the idea that there are so many creative people in the city and that there is so much empty space in Neukölln and that these two potentials linked together would give a fantastic benefit to everybody. The people would have a space to create in, the landlords would not have decay, and the people in the neighbourhood would have a lively street with new interesting neighbours. The idea of temporary use was behind this idea of neighbourhood development.

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They didn't want to be employed somewhere from 9-5 and started a start-up. The idea behind it is participation and bottom-up development of the city. It started from the idea of interim uses, but the idea to change the name was quite quick (initially it was called It was called *Zwischennutzungsagentur* 'Interim use agency'), because it was clear that people don't want to be there in-between. This is why it is called **Coopolis** now – cooperation and polis (the city). It was clear after a while that we are not about being there for a short time.

We applied for funding in the area of neighbourhood management association (*Quartiersmanagement*), which is a support program financed by the EU, the city of Berlin and the borough Neukölln in neighbourhoods that have a low number on the social index. Neukölln has eleven neighbourhoods with a neighbourhood management association, which is the highest number of all the boroughs in Berlin. The first neighbourhood was Reuterkiez¹ which had a lot of empty shops on ground floors.

I met the people from *Zwischennutzungsagentur* the year it started. At that time I looked for a room for myself. And it was so easy in the north of Neukölln... where now everything is so gentrified and cool. I think it was in 2005 or 2006 when I walked through the neighbourhood and everything was empty. We just looked at the vacant shops in the south side. You could be very picky. We, me and a guy I had just met, didn't have much money. He was a builder and I did body work – Yoga and the Grinberg Method².

So we walked around the neighbourhood and we picked one ... and asked the neighbours. They told us who the owners were and we called them saying that we would like to rent their ground floor.

This all happened in the neighbourhood where Coopolis – at that time still *Zwischennutzungsagentur* also worked. I got to know them from being in the neighbourhood, and also being a spatial planner. Somehow I started working there.

1. www.quartiersmanagement-berlin.de

2. www.grinbergmethod.com

DEVELOPMENT: HANDS ON

So what do you do?

I can say what we did in the area of Neukölln. There are three areas of neighbourhood management association. The first thing is that you walk around and you make a documentation of all the empty spaces, you write them down, you make a map. Then you look at the area and think where you could start to bring people in. You look at the plan. The next thing is that you call the landlord. There were actually **two types of communication: with the landlord or with the housing management**. We had to present them the area, show that it is under managed, that numbers are bad and people here don't have the money to rent a shop, and that we would have people interested in this space and would do guided tours for about 20-30 people. All of these people were registered in our office and we knew them and what they wanted to do. We didn't check their business plan, but we wanted to have a sense of if they really wanted to start something or were more in the idea phase. We asked the landlords how big is the property, how many rooms, what kind of heating,

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etc. and collected that data. And then we asked how much rent do they want. So we would have an overview of what they thought. On the other side we had an open door for four hours on Wednesdays and Fridays for people who were looking for space. We never had to advertise.

Sounds almost like a real-estate agency, but without the owner looking for anyone.

But we looked at it from the idea of **development of the neighbourhood**. We wouldn't recommend two bars next to each other for example. We looked at what could go well together. There were people who make hats, and people who make shoes and there would be an area where they could meet. On the tour it was also very clear that some people had theoretically good ideas, but we could also see **if the chemistry is working**.

The tours were an opportunity for the two sides to meet. Why it worked for the landlord side was that it was surprising which kind of people came. It questioned the idea of who runs a business – everybody. It's a big expression, but it seems that some landlords had a shift in perception. One lady in the beginning was against having people from abroad, she was completely racist and everything and we were even questioning if we would work at all with her. But it was kind of clear that she was just afraid of everybody. She would have liked to have a single man that works during the day and isn't home – an attitude of 'don't live in my house'. It took me half a year to get her to respond to my letters. I just rang at the door, because we wanted to have it – it was a really cool space. Now there are three galleries and one person living there.

It seems like these landlords are obviously interested that people use those spaces.

No, its not that obvious actually. That's just pure theory. They have lived in the area, they have had the house in the area for years. The people asking to use the space before were brothels or casinos, maybe. The landlords were afraid of having criminals on the ground floor.

PROPOSITION: TEMPORARY USE**Were these businesses opened then on a temporary basis?**

Yes, because temporary was less dangerous for the landlords and also less dangerous for the people to try something out. This neighbourhood wasn't good, people didn't really want to be there, not like they do right now. It was grey and empty and people were depressed, in the evening it was empty. You didn't have bars or businesses...
When I lived there, there was no place I could get food during the day. There was one falafel shop that was OK. You could feel somehow that the popularity was coming, though. So for both sides it was a nice concept to try out, but it was not meant to last forever.

So temporary use is a good strategy for bringing the place to life, but at some point permanent use will have to take over?

It's mostly the same people that are the permanent users now. But I

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wouldn't bring it to such a theoretical level. Of the people that started going there and being the in-between users, 90% of them wanted to stay. So it started with the idea that it is maybe temporary, but this wasn't the reality.

ARGUMENT: INDEPENDENCE AND NETWORKING

But what about Coopolis? You connect the landlords and the people, but how do you survive?

Our income comes from the government. This is why we **worked in a neighbourhood** that had a **neighbourhood management association – they had funding for projects**. And we applied for funding with this idea – they had a jury of people from the neighbourhood. It was free for everyone – for the landlords and for the people. It was important that we were independent. The project was meant to last for three years.

In one neighbourhood we followed up with a project that was made for the landlords, in a way. In the first year it was about creating a network of local landlords and of the 'creative industries' that were new in the area. We had lectures and kind of a get together so that they would get to know each other on a bigger scale. In this first year we brought the landlords and all the new businesses together. After that year there were three projects of network development. One for the landlords in Reuterkiez³, one for the creative industries (KreativNetzNeukölln⁴) that were accompanied by Coopolis, and one network for fashion that was accompanied by another office. So now we also have a network of fashion businesses, and also of people who sew or knit and do design.

3. www.eigentuemer-netzwerk-reuterkiez.de

4. www.knnk.org

And there is also a network called **Creative Network Neukölln** that we started. We invited all the people in the creative industries and organised things for them for the last few years and now they are a self-running network.

When you see all of it in a time-line then at first there was our thing, then there were more people.

Sounds like something from the Bible :)

Yeah. Then people came there, they settled there, and built their own churches (laughter). We did it together with the local municipality – these municipalities in Berlin function as cities on their own. Sometimes they have a different political regime and they always fight with each other. People came there to support these initiatives. We organized workshops, for example about health insurance, retirement funding, and cheques, which were very helpful, because it brought together about 50 people who avoid these subjects, but somehow have to deal with them. These were all people working in the creative field, mini-businesses, like one man, two people, three people. The aim was to give them support in creating their base a bit better. Because when you work maybe you don't have time to think who is a good tax person and then in December you get a letter that you had to do your taxes in May and then you are under total stress. We tried to help them to be a bit more relaxed, to think of it in an organised meeting that lasted for four hours. This is also why they

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continue with the network. For example last week, someone needed to do a presentation with live drawing, someone needed their web page done etc., and it is easy through the network. Coopolis was behind finding the funding.

Are there other 'Coopolises' in other boroughs in Berlin as well?

Maybe yes, I don't know. There might be, but I don't know them, because most of the developments that do city development have their own drive, their own ideas. Also, the reason why we don't have that much discussion is that it is so much work. We knew what we wanted to reach or what we wanted to do and because it involves so many people you can really spend a lot of time on that. While working there that was enough for me – I didn't want to meet all the other offices in all the other areas. I was a body worker, and I had friends and I wanted to do other stuff. For me that was enough of this context in my life. At that time I also met all these people who opened their spaces and they had parties and they had exhibitions and it is such a rich world that you are in and you could spend so much more time than you have.

So in Berlin there is not much empty space left over?

No, there is not. And you can feel it in the city; it has changed so dramatically, It is crazy to think that 7 or even 6 years ago Neukölln was empty. You can not imagine that any more. The prices for housing have gone through the roof. It is ridiculous when you see the poverty index that we have – **20% of people in Berlin live below the poverty line**, but at the same time **prices for housing and the business spaces went up maybe 50% in Neukölln**.

So you helped to gentrify the neighbourhood?

We are much too small for that. This would have happened also without our project, because of the mechanisms from the international market. They buy the houses and make them much more expensive - it's the economic approach to the city which started in 2007, maybe. Somehow Berlin was too boring before, I guess, that it didn't happen earlier. It was kept so cheap, but now... if you look at it from outside, then of course you can say that our project was just another one that helped to gentrify the neighbourhood. But I don't see it like that because what is more important is that we now have a **network of local landlords that still really own their own house**. It was really important to see that these people who really still own their house and live there, or live somewhere else in Berlin, have a totally different attitude – the house is not purely for economic gain, they know their tenants, they want the neighbourhood to be nice. What we did wasn't just gentrifying, but bringing people together who really are in the neighbourhood. It was a neighbourhood development project. But of course gentrification happened as well.

What was also an important point for us was that we made the prices more realistic. Because at the beginning the landlords were more like 'Ok, I want 8 Euros per square meter'. And we said 'you want 8 euros, but your shop has been empty for 2 years. Of course a brothel or a casino will give it to you, but if you want a group of people who have their office space or their gallery or a studio or a bar then maybe it is 2 euros. At the beginning they were shocked, but then they met the people and realized

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that their interests are not purely economic as well. So **either you take them and the 2 Euros, or you don't**. That really made a price shift in the neighbourhood. It also made a shift in negotiating prices for houses. For me as well, I thought initially that if the landlord asked a price then it was because that is what she needs, but then I realized it is like every price in the world – it has just been made up. It makes you understand that housing is also a market and you can negotiate and you can say no, you can also say 'that's what I have, you can give me the space or not'. This makes sense for people, but it doesn't make sense for investment funds for whom a **house is just a number in a chart**; they are totally disconnected from reality. You can't approach them with natural logic. Sometimes it might be cheaper for them to not do anything.

I must say it was a very interesting time; I really enjoyed having contact with all these landlords and finding out the stories of the houses and why they are empty.

CONCLUSION: A DATABASE AND MANAGING PARTICIPATION. A FUN TIME WITH BAD MONEY!

Maybe the personal stories are not talked about enough?

True, this is what you find out also when you bring people together – there are so many other reasons that bring people together. One of my colleagues, Mareike, she is still doing it, and we call it the **business space management** (*Gewerbeleerstandsmanagment*, vacant business space management), basically managing vacant spaces that could be businesses. She really loves this game of bringing people together – knowing things like this landlord is quite old already, or there is this cool bathroom from the 70s in there and it would be so cool if people could see this. This is her motivation.

What we have is a really good **database**. At first it was very basic – just address and contact information, but it became bigger, organised into categories. I think theory should always only be added in the review. If someone would have told me do the project that way, I would have not done it. But we did it, and while we did it, we had no idea if it would work. At first we were sceptical ourselves. For example, about the housing network – will people come?

One thing I would be worried about is that all these uses are creative uses. Isn't there a lack of mix?

Yes, but how many shoemakers do you know, for example? That's the problem. People in this city do these things. They are in the creative industries. 60% of the people were from the neighbourhood or from locals, so it was not big enough that people would actually move to Neukölln because of the project. Of course there is also a mixture, but it was inviting for mostly more educated people from everywhere.

How could it be different?

That was always a question for the neighbourhood management association. Like, OK, you have to make more for the locals, to bring them together.

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Participation always depends on the people. For example, some people from the creative industries are not interested in having all this community blah. It is totally based on the people, because it is work.

This year we are doing a project in **Kreuzberg**, and I notice that I don't know the area, and it is so much more difficult to do that. In Neukölln, we live there and nobody can pay you for that. If we would have had that in paid hours, it's impossible. In Kreuzberg, I am there at my working hours; it takes your life to get to know a place.

Your experience could be a tool-kit for neighbourhoods?

The structure of our database could be used. I guess the owner of Coopolis would sell it now to people. For real city development projects, what we did there was such an uninteresting project financially, with so much work. You really can do it when you want to do 'something', and live there and make it nicer... **because the money is really bad... but it was a lot of fun.**



Photos: Rebecca Solfrian