



The protest of Köpi in big and red. Photo: Triin Pitsi

INSIGHT INTO THE NOT QUITE COMMON HOUSES OF BERLIN

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The history of squatting¹ in Berlin is long and famous especially given that the number of houses that have been taken over has been phenomenal, and resistance against closing them has been relatively vigorous. Squats are definitely part of this city's nature and something that can be called urban culture. I tried, while visiting the city, to figure out what has become of the movement today.

We should begin with the fact that in contemporary Berlin **there are no 'real' squats**; officially they are all known as **'house-projects'**. This means that no one is really living anywhere without paying rent, and generally the rent, which is considerably lower than the market prices, is paid to the new owners². There are also houses that have shared ownership – squatters have bought them out. But according to the definition this means that they are no longer so-called 'real' squats.

I happened to visit two houses in Berlin whose present is very different, yet their history is comparable. At a time they used to be so-called 'real' squats that had been taken over by youth who believed in anarchy. Fierce battles were held on the streets of Berlin for these houses. This was at the time of the vacuum-like situation in their society which followed the fall of the wall, when everything seemed possible.

1. *The topic is more complicated than can be explained in one article. The term squat is far from being clear. In my interpretation squatting is taking over a property without legal right and paying. If the building is taken over with the owners agreement and/or paying rent it is not squatting. Academic literature defines squatting in a similar manner.*

2. *After Germany was reunited in 1990 most of the state owned property was returned to their legitimate owners.*

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Kreuztizerstraße

Photos: Kaija-Luisa Kurik

The house on **Kreuztizerstraße** is everything but something that one would refer to as a squat. The house is spacious and decently renovated and includes all contemporary comforts. I had to admit that in an Estonian context it would be considered relatively luxurious. There are also younger people in the house, but most of the inhabitants are already middle-aged and have small children. Many of the inhabitants had illegally taken over the house after the wall and stayed. In the 90s the house, which was relatively uninhabitable, was renovated with their own means, but in 2000s these improvements were funded by the government. The opportunity to buy the house in co-ownership was added.

Even though the whole house gives a cosy and family-orientated impression, the life in the squat on Kreuztizerstraße is quite regulated. Moving in there also means obligations, both in front of the house as well as community projects: there are traditional events held in the house and in addition a yearly street festival. The new inhabitants are chosen through acquaintances and every newcomer has to go through a three month trial period. They definitely avoid people who are only looking for a cheap place to live. In addition to the rent and community commitments there are other financial obligations, for example a monthly input into the shared funds, which usually means buying food within a certain budget.

If the typical vision of squatters is an image of hippie lifestyles, a refusal to work, and vegetarians who are extremist in ecological politics, then in neither of the squats that I visited in Berlin were typical. The inhabitants of Kreuztizerstraße generally have regular jobs – there are social workers, construction workers, musicians, pharmacists, lecturers etc. Also the children, contrary to the general opinion, study in regular schools. Although they consume ecological products and recycle, there are no extreme views regarding that. Many of them are vegetarians or vegans, but eating meat is not looked upon condescendingly.

The entrance of Kreuztizer

Photo: Triin Pitsi

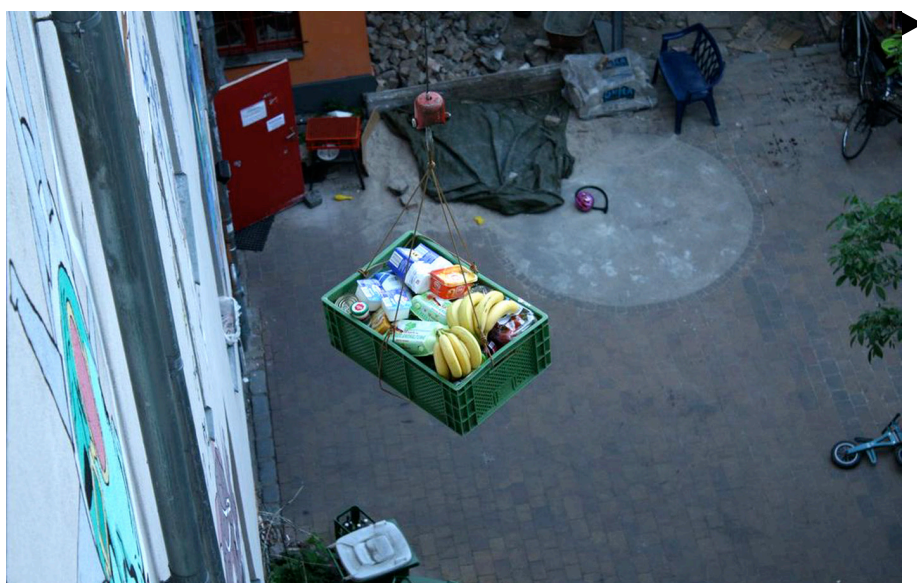


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There is also a public cinema and a bar in the house. The cinema shows films every day, 365 days a year. In addition to that it might be the only cinema in Berlin where you are allowed to smoke. The bar holds an event called **VoKü** three times a week. VoKü or also *Volxxküche*³, literally the people's kitchen, is a type of catering that is common in most house-projects where healthy food with reasonable prices is offered. VoKü is often also visited by people who normally don't go to squats.

In addition to that there is also an information centre for people with psychological problems, in the squat. The bar, cinema, VoKü and the support- and information centre have been created to enable the project to survive with less money. This is an important aspect in trying to reduce the effects of gentrification in Berlin, which has forced people to move further out from the centre.

3. SEE MORE: de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volxxk%C3%BCche



The food of the BIG 'family'
Photo: Triin Pitsi

Köpenicker Straße 137, or Köpi for short, is one of the most famous squats of Berlin. At first sight I was anguished by the signs forbidding photography and the abundance of unfriendly dogs. At the same time I was impressed by the massive size and alternative look of the house. Köpi looks more like a well defended fortress and differs a lot from Kreuzzigerstraße's house with a homely milieu. There are a countless number of people living on five floors and house itself is rather tainted and feels like a ghostly castle. The first thing I found out was that for a long time there was also someone from Estonia living in Köpi. Somehow I'm not surprised – if there's an Estonian in every harbour, why not in Köpi?

Since 90s, Köpi has been offered on auctions, and there have been several owners. The inhabitants of Köpi have organised **hundreds of protests** and meetings for the support of their home and this has scared off the potential developers. There have been tens of interventions organised in support of Köpi, not only in Berlin, but all over Germany and elsewhere in Europe. Despite of all of this the building found a buyer a few years ago. The members of the squat won in court and the new owner made a 30-year contract with them, which guarantees that the rent will stay the same during this period. The rent plus utilities are around 70 euros combined right now. And we shouldn't forget that it is the city centre of Berlin (Mitte).

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Köpi has also had an **effect on the surrounding plots**. There are a number of empty buildings in close proximity. The funniest story relates to the house on the next plot where a retirement home was planned about five years ago. The owners of the plot had no idea about the neighbourhood. By the time they went to meet the neighbours, half of the building was already constructed. It's not known if it was because of an unexpected bankruptcy or something else, but the construction was stopped. The half-built walls of the building are great for practising graffiti.

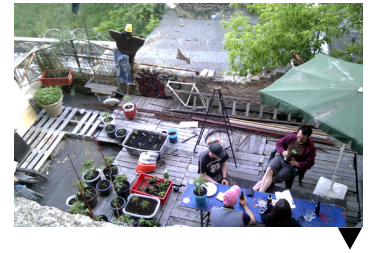
Köpi has been divided into apartments and every household decides amongst themselves about taking in new inhabitants. Every Sunday there is a general house meeting, where they discuss their problems. Many inhabitants have been raised in Köpi. Today the people are on the younger side and there are almost no families with children. There are practically no rules. The maintenance of the house takes place on voluntary basis.

Köpi, with its bar and concert venue, is also well known for organising alternative events. In the bigger concerts there has even been around three thousand people. The money gathered is used for necessary repair works and paying for the legal advice.⁴

Köpi is generally always opened to tourists and allegedly to everyone who shares their values. And the former squatters are popular amongst tourists, because people sense what an important part of Berlin's urban culture this is.

Considering all this it unfortunately feels that **there is just as much left of this once 'squatters Mecca'** as there is of the Berlin wall. Taking over new houses is looked at in pessimistic tones by the squatters themselves. They are bothered by the negative stance of the society and the media image of a squatter as a criminal. I tried to find out from the inhabitants of the two squats the reason behind not having any so called 'real' squats in Berlin any more. I was also interested in what has happened to the 300-400 squats that emerged in the 90s, the high-time of squatting. It came out that about twenty of them have been bought by former squatters, but many of them just pay rent to the new owner. What speaks against shared-ownership is the fact that most squatters do not have enough funds, because being a landlord also brings big expenses. The emergence of new squats is also held back by the fact that the local governments and the police are well prepared to stop any attempts to take over a house and they know how to get rid of the squatters quickly and profitably.

The community life in such house-projects is **easy to criticise, but also to overly idealise**. As in every society, the micro-societies of squats consist of different people. Not all of them think the same or are radically against the state or the justice system. Yet it is important that they think a little bit differently than the general mass and at least question if living in the so-called mainstream is the best option one has.



The folks of Köpi spending time on their balcony.

Photo: Triin Pitsi

4. Although the residents of Köpi have the willpower and spirit of protest, sometimes legal advice is also needed.