




Berlin, a Repurposed Ruin, and Constant Change as the Fixed Condition: A Photo-Comic

Pablo Arboleda  and Pawel Jankiewicz

Abstract

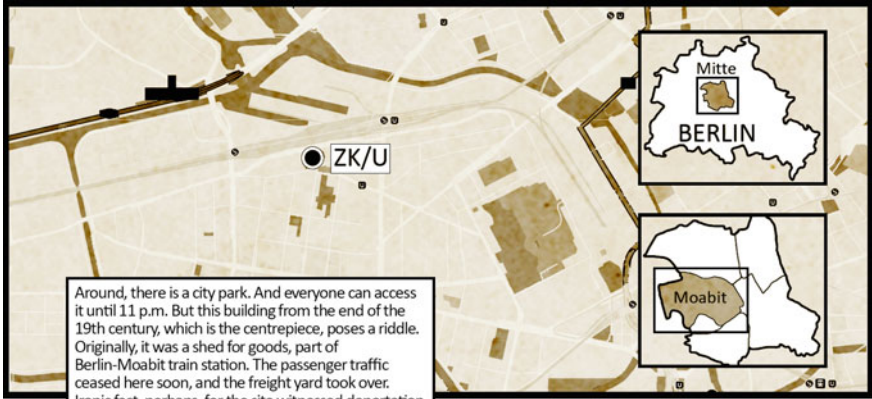
Located at a former train depot, today ZK/U (Centre for Arts and Urbanistics) is progressively becoming a creative catalyst in Berlin. The goal of this chapter is to explore the processes by which derelict sites are repurposed as new cultural landmarks through minimal, DIY architectural interventions, retaining ruined materiality as an aesthetic value. To bridge the gap between scholarship and the arts, the authors opted for elaborating a photo-comic, and thus, methodology relied on fieldnotes, photos and interviews to grasp the motivations and commitments enabling life within ZK/U and the surrounding Moabit City Garden. Framed by architecture, urban studies, human geography and critical heritage, this chapter builds on ZK/U's collaborative and open-minded spirit.

P. Arboleda (✉)

School of Geographical and Earth Sciences, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK
e-mail: Pablo.Arboleda@glasgow.ac.uk

P. Jankiewicz

Independent Writer, Berlin, Germany
e-mail: pj44@wp.pl



Around, there is a city park. And everyone can access it until 11 p.m. But this building from the end of the 19th century, which is the centrepiece, poses a riddle. Originally, it was a shed for goods, part of Berlin-Moabit train station. The passenger traffic ceased here soon, and the freight yard took over. Ironic fact, perhaps, for the site witnessed deportation of Jews to the concentration camps.



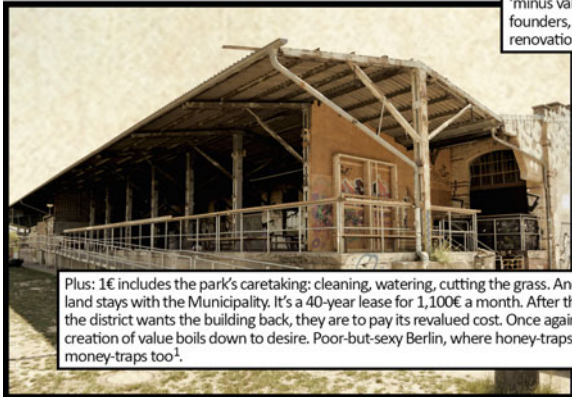
The growth of graffiti points to a decade of abandonment. The building is not enlisted: full reign to freedom and a tacit responsibility – for those with sensibility. Since 2012 it hosts 'ZK/U', 'Centre for Arts and Urbanistics', a private residency with public aspirations. For a dozen of artists and researchers, living here means communal exchange. The German welcome becomes a global passage.



The opening of the Centre was a result of a 3-year process of reflection, community meetings and a public contest with 70 proposals on the table. KUNSTrePUBLIK, a registered association with a non-profit status, won – thanks to an economically feasible idea that respected the character of the place.

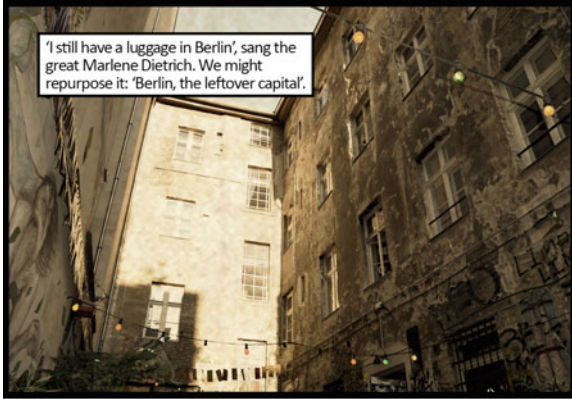


They bought the building for 1€. A substantial sum, since it presented a 'minus value', as states one of the founders, Matthias Einhoff. The renovation costed 1.2 million euro.

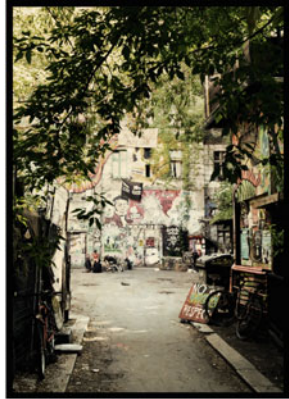


Plus: 1€ includes the park's caretaking: cleaning, watering, cutting the grass. And the land stays with the Municipality. It's a 40-year lease for 1,100€ a month. After that, if the district wants the building back, they are to pay its revalued cost. Once again, creation of value boils down to desire. Poor-but-sexy Berlin, where honey-traps turn money-traps too¹.





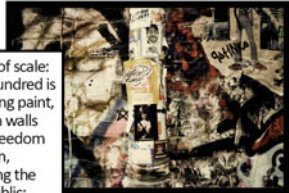
'I still have a luggage in Berlin', sang the great Marlene Dietrich. We might repurpose it: 'Berlin, the leftover capital'.



And further: what's left and what's capital here? The town is a mecca of DIY; of participative, minimal, re-appropriation projects. Beyond ZK/U, the traces of abandonment are also a strong card. Ruin aesthetics is no longer conceived as a stigma but as a purposeful cultural and identity value². A sign of resistance to the neoliberal city or a selling point? Lo and behold: both³.



There's the effect of scale: one tag is dirt, a hundred is Berlin. Tags, cracking paint, stickers. The Berlin walls are still claiming freedom and social inclusion, constantly rewriting the private and the public: 'WE were here'.





ZK/U has three main sources of income: residents, events and occasional funding from institutions. We were the residents.



As it happens, we met in the communal kitchen – that radiant scene of daily life, a pump for ZK/U's arteries. Art was visible, though we were both interested in the 'U' part of the thing. We took as a premise that the content of the notion 'ZK/U' was fluid, inhabited the ongoing projects. For us, the 'Urban' in question was that porous⁴, shifting tissue which made our 'Centre'. And we both valued interdisciplinarity. An architect and a writer. Who is who?

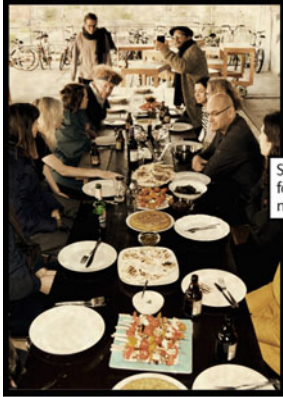
ZK/U's 10 house commands

1. **Treat each other with respect**
 Any form of violence, vandalism and intolerance is prohibited. We cannot accept sexism and intimidating behaviour towards each other. Please tell us if something happens that makes you feel threatened in any



'(...) not a fixed set of ideas and principles (...) continuous formation', reads ZK/U's website. Ours was an attempt to use the residency program to investigate its formula.





Sometimes it's a forced choice, this opening for the 'continuous formation'. Ruination is not only a trait of the buildings.



Living among others poses a challenge. Yet the commonplace offers the answers. The range of options in ZK/U was admirable; sprouting from grassroots incentives, through dinner conversations, up to bike tours and curator visits. Here a methodology awaited. It allowed for on-site verification, 5 interviews conducted, 1,800 photos taken. A total of 8 months of in- and cohabitation. The path that leads from the fieldwork to the output was to be collaborative, we concluded, or wasn't to be at all.



And we found a form that could capture and communicate this flux of different speeds and intensities: photo-comic. *La Grieta* by Carlos Spottorno and Guillermo Abril gave us the hint.

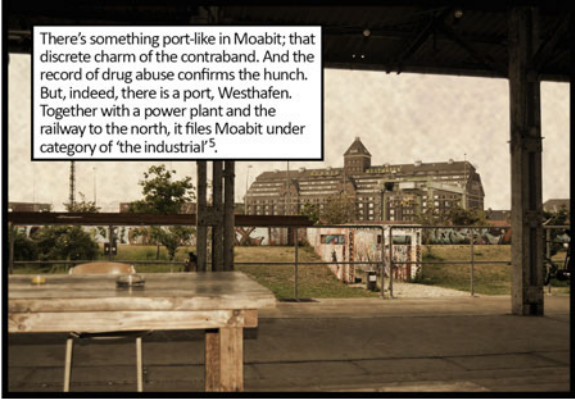


Like the earthquake-proof constructions, Moabit retains built-in cracks. It has no slick image to stick to. Identity politics didn't come with one-liner on 'what it is about'. Other cool-and-shabby districts can point at 'the thing'. Kreuzberg – graffiti; Friedrichshain – techno; Neukölln – startups. Moabit is just a hood. To be sure, it feels like a city.



Over half of Moabites have a migration background. Many are descendants of Turkish workers arriving in the 1970s. Arabic cuisine flourishes too. But newcomers aren't inscribed into an overtly 'global' frame, akin to the clean-cut international style in architecture. It is Germanness that welcomes them – one from under the sign of the 'Kneipe', a pub where everyone asks for your name. Even the English speech picks here a local, kitschy warmth. The hip is held at bay. Still...

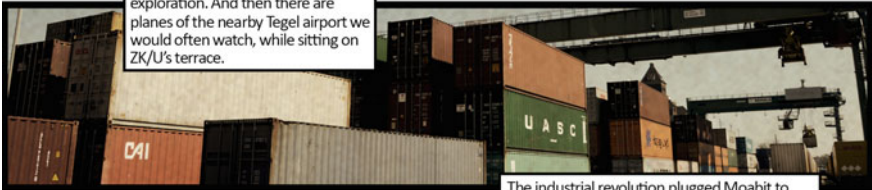




There's something port-like in Moabit; that discrete charm of the contraband. And the record of drug abuse confirms the hunch. But, indeed, there is a port, Westhafen. Together with a power plant and the railway to the north, it files Moabit under category of 'the industrial'⁵.

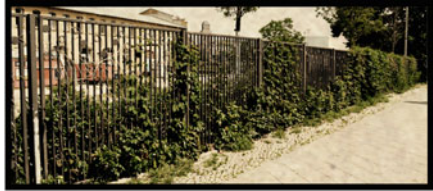


Hence, one has sometimes an impression of ZK/U being suspended in mid-air, as the roads, warehouses and guarded areas exclude the surroundings from an easy exploration. And then there are planes of the nearby Tegel airport we would often watch, while sitting on ZK/U's terrace.



The industrial revolution plugged Moabit to Berlin. And the industry's withdrawal had its measure too. Today, the creative industry could be a stimulus. Rents are cheaper here.

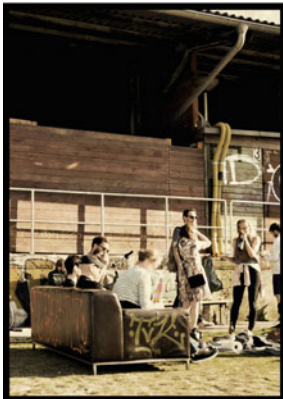




A trope of Arabic poetry, 'wuquf 'ala al-atlal' – or 'stopping by the ruins' – tells of a wandering Bedouin chancing upon an ancient rubble, becoming lost in a meditation that breaks the ruins' time-space pattern. Thus, cul-de-sac-led, ZK/U has an entrance that is also an exit, a problem which is its own solution. The park is receptive. Turkish grilling, hipster shining, motherly caring, elderly rolling. Intercultural, intergenerational. Inter-class.



Form follows function: 'a bank looks like a bank, neat and secured, because it wants you to think that your money is safe' – says Matthias. He is aware that ZK/U provides a different image. It's not a museum, but rather a site of 'desacralization' – of architecture, precisely, and of social relations. Yet, when the users' function comes first, a re-sacralisation occurs. The faithful become here the priests.





Ruins, admitting flows, tides of inside and outside, have their pulse. And this results in vitality⁶.



The urban beehive project 'Moabees', located at ZK/U's front, and the community garden just across the path by the eastern wing of the building, are co-ventures: sharing the same philosophy, while keeping their own institutional standing, history of activity and online presence. They are examples of ruins' seductive power to host and coexist with new uses. Parasites? Not at all. Rather symbiotic relations. Completing by not completing. In ZK/U, there is no such a thing as a finalised space⁷.



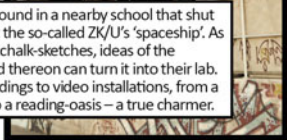
Here's a formula for value production. And it's in the order of nothing less than materialization of a vision. Participative effort at the root / Pervaded by lightness: artistic invention and local affection⁸.



Self-built works of Jan Körbes concern resources and re-use. This questions the architecture that lends itself too easily to the profiteering scheme⁹. Still, he deems his approach 'not ecological, but logical'. His Silo House next to ZK/U's entrance is a mobile structure, a repurposed grain silo. A former resident, Ali Reza, found there his temporary and informal refuge. Ali benefits from ZK/U and ZK/U benefits from Silo, which became a local attraction. It has even postcards for the visitors.



Using blackboards found in a nearby school that shut down, Jan also built the so-called ZK/U's 'spaceship'. As if some percolating chalk-sketches, ideas of the spectators projected thereon can turn it into their lab. From podcast recordings to video installations, from a conference room to a reading-oasis – a true charmer.





Jan – the author also of the park’s furniture, made of old tyres – starts his recycling with looking for a thing’s potential, but in the end he retains visible the traces of its original function. DIY would not be a movement had it shielded its manual from view.



The shared insight of ZK/U dwellers and its satellites is that a new desire, stemming from the immanence of life, always arrives in a context. Exchangeability of parts is thus a prerequisite and an effect of a collective vigour¹⁰. And in ZK/U this finds concrete, material instances. Everyone can intervene on the building, after discussing with KUNSTreREPUBLIK. The bird-shaped decorations on the roof will be eventually removed. Just as that gypsy wagon has been, folded and taken further.





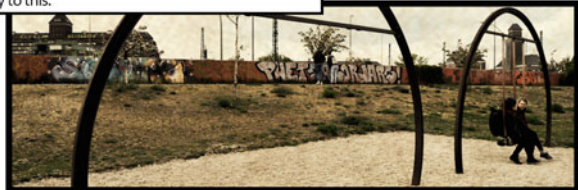
Ella Poniżovskiy doesn't like referring to her work as street art. It has alternative connotations for her. What she's aiming at is rather art-in-the-street. And her calligraphies – intertwining Yiddish, German and Arabic – straddle that liquid border between migration and integration.



In April 2019 she painted both sides of ZK/U. Now, one is asking 'Where from?' and the other 'Where to?' Written with limepaint, the mural is intended to stay there for years, but eventually disappear. 'Leaving footprints, but not carrying a luggage' – as Ella says. Thereby, these in-and-outscursions affirm the constant change that gives to this place its character.¹¹



Not unlike a migrant, ZK/U is subject to regular, transient modifications according to punctual uses. Living here requires flexing and relaxing. And these swings in the park, made from old railway tracks, literally testify to this.







Yet again, the building appears here as a blueprint of the apt *savoir-faire*. Take the terrace. Formally speaking, it belongs to ZK/U. It was decided, however, to split it in two halves by a shifting wall. The part with the studios is for residents, the other side has a public use calculated therein. Thus one can socialize with the visitors, or suggest them an alternative.





It's all about cooperation. ZK/U thrives on its audience, and so do the residents' portfolios. Moabit without the Centre would also be less itself.



Many public events, like the monthly flea-market, are held onsite and they are widely advertised in the neighbourhood. The incentive is found on the both sides of the gate. And it brings food stalls, crafts and music. And every two months, the door is open for people to visit the latest resident production. At times individual residents stage their own public events too.



The Main Hall is also a source of income. It is a space for ethical rent where not everything goes. The proposed activities cannot counter ZK/U's ideological profile. Community, diversity, integration, participation, culture and sustainability are welcome. Refrained is the opposite.



Every morning an archaeology of few empty bottles and butts appears without digging the ground. Youngsters chilled out in this corner the night before. Take it easy.



Gelaal Zaher is a son of a Palestinian refugee, and from his association 'Karamé' ('dignity' in Arabic) coordinates this or that bunch of immigrant kids in Moabit. The neighbourhood gives him a sense of familiarity which now he extends to ZK/U. He finds here a spot to integrate kids in their activities, like graffiti. – 'THANKS FOR THIS PLACE', says one of the tags.

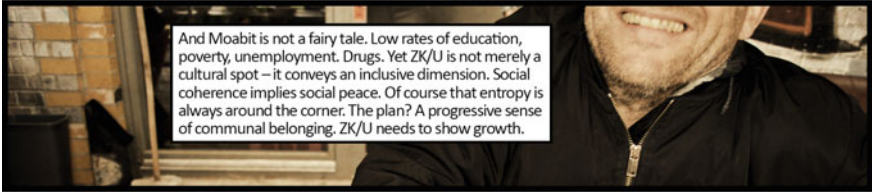


And VIP BOX, one of the Centre's experimental architectures, is where Karamé grown-ups meet to play cards. Its accordion unfolding gives an instant feeling of being 'in'. For those who have found 'it'. The 'je ne sais quoi' of the social.





The place incites in people a mindful behaviour. In Matthias' assessment, ZK/U offers an informal control of the area, for the mere presence of grassroot caretakers prevents from anything-goes.



And Moabit is not a fairy tale. Low rates of education, poverty, unemployment. Drugs. Yet ZK/U is not merely a cultural spot – it conveys an inclusive dimension. Social coherence implies social peace. Of course that entropy is always around the corner. The plan? A progressive sense of communal belonging. ZK/U needs to show growth.

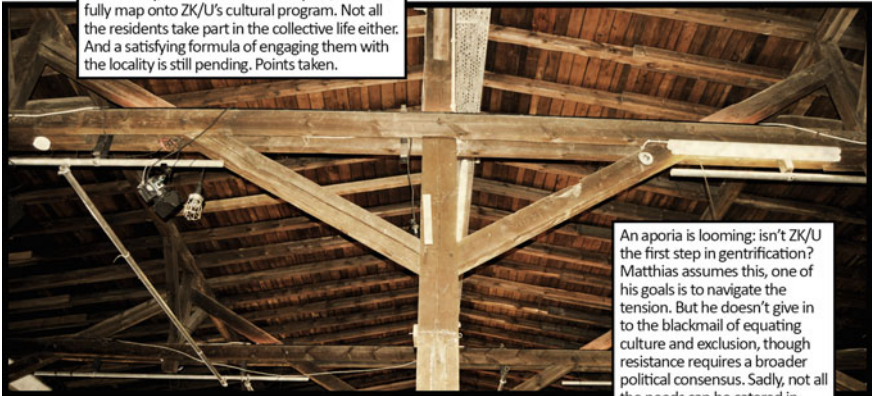


Vanishing of the public space is a stigmatizing factor, it reads 'losers'. In May 2019, an art collective organized a symbolic burial to mourn the very loss. Us no-longer-in-place were the coffin. The park by ZK/U received it – cemetery-like. People gave their speeches. Both a funeral service and a political demonstration.





Self-criticism concerns 'bridging'. The Arab community, however vital for the park, doesn't fully map onto ZK/U's cultural program. Not all the residents take part in the collective life either. And a satisfying formula of engaging them with the locality is still pending. Points taken.

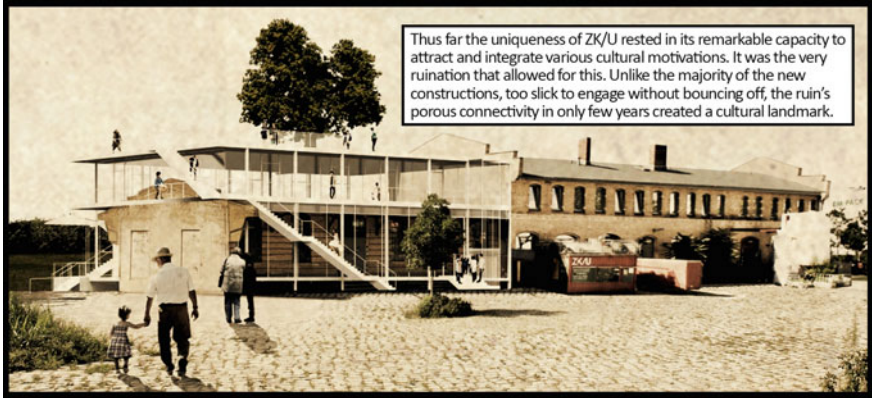


An aporia is looming: isn't ZK/U the first step in gentrification? Matthias assumes this, one of his goals is to navigate the tension. But he doesn't give in to the blackmail of equating culture and exclusion, though resistance requires a broader political consensus. Sadly, not all the needs can be catered in here. Another point taken – the perfect is lacking.



In the meantime, KUNSTrePUBLIK is engaging in further projects across the city, like that of 'Haus der Statistik'. Also a ruin to be curated, though in Berlin's strict centre.







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