

# The German Capital at a Crossroads

Berlin is changing. That's nothing new, of course, but even as integration challenges have resulted in crime in some neighborhoods, others are trying to find ways to avoid the stasis that comes with gentrification. Success is uncertain.



Berlin, where the only constant is change.

"If you move to Paris, chances are you want to become a Parisian. Those moving to Munich want to become Münchners. But people who move to Berlin," says "Babylon Berlin" director Henk Handloegten, "want to subjugate the city." Everyone declares the public space to be their own personal property and makes it clear to others: This is my city.

There are men everywhere peeing on trees like dogs marking their territory. Graffiti artists and taggers cover every free space they can find. Mothers with their twin strollers clear the sidewalks as if to say: "Get out of the way. Here comes your pension!" Aggressive bicyclists race among the pedestrians and, of course, ignore the red lights.

Like most people in this city, they have no doubt that they're in the right, that they're the good guys. Eco-athletes, the urban avant-garde, constantly in close combat with pedestrians who block their path. And with the cars, whose drivers have but a single goal in life: to run them over.

As Berlin gets more crowded, the mood in the German capital has grown more aggressive. Heedlessness and violence have increased in the city, says Karlheinz Gaertner, a retired policeman who spent over 40 years patrolling the streets of Berlin. These days, he writes books about Berlin, including his most recent one, "They No Longer Know Any Limits."

Gaertner, who has the physique of a wrestler, is walking along Sonnenallee, a broad boulevard in the city's Neukölln district, the area he used to patrol. Every now and then, he runs into men he once arrested. He offers guided tours through the neighborhood to groups of visitors interested in learning what a troubled

neighborhood in Germany looks like.

A few years back, Neukölln served as a symbol for everything that had gone wrong in a Germany that largely ignored its immigrants and didn't seem to care that they lived in isolated, almost ghetto-like neighborhoods separated from the rest of society. Chaos was the rule in some schools. Arab clans waged war against each other on the streets and the police seemed helpless.

The share of residents with an immigrant background in Neukölln is over 40 percent, with many coming from Turkey and Arab countries. It is the Berlin district with the lowest level of education, the highest dependency on social benefits and the greatest risk of poverty. The unemployment rate in some parts of the district is as high as 25 percent, and the proportion of migrants in some schools is around 90 percent.

Neukölln's former district mayor, Heinz Buschkowsky of the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD), became a media star with his dramatic, boisterous descriptions of the state of his district in countless talk shows. Some fellow SPD members even wanted to expel him from the party, accusing him of resorting to "right-wing populism" in the debate over immigrants and migration.

For years, Gaertner has been campaigning for action against the knife attacks that are becoming rampant in Berlin. And it's true: In the Berlin of today, there are many more people than there used to be from cultures where knives are frequently carried as an everyday item by young men.

"But you can only grab for your knife if you have one on you," says Gaertner, who has witnessed the suffering of knife-attack victims countless times. The development prompted him to organize initiatives like football tournaments where players are required to disarm if they want to participate. It provides a venue where they can play against the cops and show their true abilities.

In southern Neukölln in September, an Arab repeat offender named Nidal R. was literally executed in broad daylight on the street, sprayed with eight gunshots. Around 2,000 mourners, mostly Muslims, attended his funeral, where they were separated by gender. Some told the television cameras at the event that the 36-year-old had actually been a good guy, despite the fact that Nidal R. had committed over 90 crimes and spent 14 years in prison.

On a concrete wall near the scene of the crime, someone daubed graffiti celebrating the victim as a hero. Meanwhile, the rest of Germany was forced to realize the existence of a parallel society in the country, one that apparently has its own ideas of heroism and masculinity — and perhaps even of law and order.

The Berlin chapter of the Free Democratic Party, a business-friendly party that isn't opposed to a bit of populism should the situation call for it, quickly put up a poster at the wall: "It's the law of the state that counts, not that of the street." The city of Berlin sent painters to cover up the graffiti.

### **'Security Guards Are Everywhere'**

Berlin frequently whitewashes problems. But sometimes, paint isn't enough. "Look over there," Gaertner says, pointing across the street. A security guard is standing in front of Campus Rütli, which used to be called the Rütli School and became notorious throughout the country for its violence and problems. There are few other industries in Berlin, says Gaertner, that are growing as rapidly as the one for security personnel.

"Security guards are everywhere in the city these days. Several are posted at each outdoor public pool in the summer and, despite their presence, there are constantly fights." Some emergency rooms at hospitals in Berlin are also having to hire security now. There have been numerous cases of assaults on nurses and care providers.

It's no surprise that the Babylonian diversity of cultures and lifestyles in Berlin can lead to conflicts. Often, they're just weird — such as when a Turkish couple doesn't want their children to go to school with Romanians and opts to send them to a Catholic private school instead. Sometimes, though, the conflicts turn violent.

### **The Paradox of Integration**

Take a jog through Hasenheide, a park nestled between the Neukölln, Kreuzberg and Tempelhof districts, and you'll find yourself slaloming through the myriad drug dealers, most of them of African descent. The Tunisian Anis Amri was one of those Berlin dealers. At one point, he was arrested for such activity, but later released. The security authorities continued monitoring him, taking a wait-and-see approach. But they waited too long: On Dec. 19, 2016, he plowed a semi-truck into the Christmas market next to Berlin's Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church and

killed 12 people.

Those who sell drugs day after day, night after night to partiers and hipsters, those who are released over and over again despite repeated run-ins with the police, can be forgiven for concluding that they have ended up in a rather decadent society, a den of sin, a lawless quagmire.

It is an erroneous conclusion, though widespread — on both the right-wing periphery of the political spectrum and among the secret fellow-travelers of global terrorism.

But perhaps the opposite is true. Sociologist Aladin El-Mafaalani believes conflicts are often a sign not of the failure of a multicultural society, but of its success. “Successful integration increases the potential for conflict,” he writes in his book “The Integration Paradox.” And he asks: “Why do people think that now, suddenly, things are supposed to be harmonious?”

El-Mafaalani, who works in the North Rhine-Westphalian Ministry for Children, the Family, Refugees and Integration, believes ongoing conflicts should be viewed as the basis for a new collective consciousness. But what should be done when values and moral concepts collide?

He believes the best approach is to foster a culture of debate, but says the goal should not be an anything-goes attitude. “If everything is equally valid, then people become indifferent,” he says. For decades, though, he adds, Germany avoided engaging in serious discussion about how to deal with the country’s history of immigration.

“A lack of language courses, no work permits, the threat of being deported every six months, no enforcement of mandatory schooling and catastrophic housing conditions: Those aren’t just problems that migrants faced for the first five or 10 years. It is still the reality for many Lebanese who arrived in the 1980s,” says El-Mafaalani “The fact that we have a problem with organized crime today doesn’t just come out of nowhere. It’s the legacy of past mistakes.”

How, though, does one go about establishing the culture of debate demanded by El-Mafaalani? It’s an illusion to imagine that the different immigrant groups in Berlin will somehow establish an intercultural dialogue of their own accord. People in the city often talk about each other, but not to each other. Multicultural

idealism and monocultural nostalgia are often cut from the same cloth of impracticality.

The German television series “4 Blocks,” now in its second season, describes the culture clash between long-established members of Arab clans and the students and hipsters who represent a new generation of Neukölln residents. The influx has left many Arabs in Neukölln feeling like they are the original Berliners.

Indeed, diversity can also lead to its own kind of delineation. Many Muslim girls in some neighborhoods of Berlin, for example, are reluctant to leave their districts. They have deep roots in Berlin quarters like Kreuzberg or Neukölln, but they feel uncomfortable in some of the more well-healed districts of the city, like Zehlendorf in the southwest, which is home to the upper middle class and the wealthy. They say they are disparaged in such places for wearing the headscarf and don’t really feel like they are even in Germany anymore. Why not? “Because only Germans live there.”

On its surface, this may seem like a bizarre statement, but there’s also a kernel of truth to it. Terms like “immigration background” suggest a sense of uniformity that doesn’t really exist. The inhabitants of Neukölln, for example, hail from more than 160 countries and often share neither language nor religion nor much else — except the neighborhood where they live, the underfunded schools their children attend and poor job prospects.

### **Berlin’s ‘Strategy 2030’**

In the popular recent television series “Babylon Berlin,” the stenographer Charlotte Ritter, played by the actress Liv Lisa Fries, moves through many different neighborhoods, milieus and social strata. The series’ three directors are convinced it is this permeability that has made Berlin special and distinguishes it from other big cities.

“But in the last several years, a phenomenon of prosperity emigration has become established, and that has led to a situation in which the neighborhoods hardly mix anymore,” says Handloegten. “People take over a neighborhood and eventually start defending it against change.”

The pressure on the real estate market means that those who signed favorable leases years ago now stay in their apartments. This can produce absurd

situations, like that of a 60-year-old couple, whose children have long since moved out, living in a 150 square meter (1,615 square foot) apartment. But if they were to move to an apartment half that size, they might have to pay twice the rent.

As such, Berlin's dynamism can lead to stasis, change to intractability. Might there be a danger of the city reverting back to its neighborhoods, back into the seven cities, 59 municipalities and 72 county jurisdictions that were merged a hundred years ago to create Berlin?

The city-state's government is currently developing a strategy called "Berlin 2030" in order to rein the rampant metropolis back in. The plan is to be adopted in 2020. The growing city, according to the internal strategy paper, "is not perceived by large sections of the population as an advantage, but increasingly as a threat ... above all through the rental developments and the gentrification associated with them."

The plan is "to involve society in as representative a way as possible" in the process through workshops with "100 stakeholders," "20 representatives of organized society" and "30 randomly chosen, representative citizens." It certainly sounds nice, but to critics it is little more than empty verbiage. They say the plan is far too narrowly focused on housing construction.

"The Berlin Strategy 2030 in its current form doesn't work," says city researcher Klaus Brake. He argues that the strategy paper puts the city government in the driver's seat and jumps to the second step before taking the first. It immediately wades into the urban development issue before the fundamental question has been clarified: How do we want to live together in Berlin?

In an open letter, critics have called for a "mobilization of urban society" in a manner that is free of "divided and selfish lobbyist groups." At first hearing, that sounds like out of touch idealism. How, after all, are 3 million mavericks supposed to communicate with each other in this behemoth of a city?

A closer look reveals a hodge-podge of hundreds of individual initiatives. Take, for example, the "Lause," an alternative housing project in Lausitzer Strasse in the Kreuzberg district with studios and handicraft businesses. It is in danger of becoming a target of real estate speculators. Among those demonstrating at a recent protest against the complex's owner, a Danish real estate mogul, was the popular ice cream seller Mauro Luongo, who stores his supplies in the building.

He even handed out free gelato at the event — from the very same ice cream truck that was struck by five bullets during the execution of clan member Nidal R., as children waited in line for their ice cream in front of the vehicle.

Google had planned to build a new campus on a neighboring street, and demonstrations by those opposed to the project regularly went late into the night. “Google is not a good neighbor,” the protest signs read. “Google off to Adlershof,” read another, referring to a technology center located far out in the city’s eastern outskirts. But precisely that kind of spatial separation of living and working is the opposite of the mix that characterizes life in Berlin.

Google finally gave up in late October and announced the building would be made available to nonprofit organizations. “It’s the city government’s job to mediate here and to communicate all of the advantages projects like this bring to the local community,” says Florian Nöll, the head of German Startups Association. Kreuzberg, he predicts, “will now immediately become known as a no-go area for tech companies.”

The Holzmarkt development along the Spree River in the city’s Friedrichshain district also has its own story to tell. If you walk from Alexanderplatz, Berlin’s eastern center, to the Spree River, you wind up at Holzmarkt. Here, where the Berlin Wall and the death strip once cut through the city, a village of wooden shacks with a restaurant, salon, day care center, campfire, nightclub, theater and bakery have been thrown together. Delegations from as far away as Tel Aviv and New York come here to marvel at the model project.

It’s creators once ran Berlin’s legendary Bar 25 club across the river until they were driven out. Then, they used a run-down building on the other side. Now, they’ve changed sides again. They are constantly finding ways to navigate through the inertia and ignorance of various government authorities who can’t fit the urban activists neatly into their Excel tables and who would rather do things by the book with a traditional investor.

The municipal administration’s helplessness creates a lot of freedom in the city. But that can then also be taken away just as arbitrarily. No matter, the Holzmarkt people will continue partying at their club for as long as they can — all night long, from Fridays to Mondays, often in the form of themed costume balls dedicated to the “golden gangster era of the 1920s: dark and glamorous.” Holzmarkt’s logo

encapsulates this hard-partying metropolis' disposition: a tomcat (a play on the German word for "hangover") with a black eye and a broad grin.

Such extemporaneous facilities have something of a tradition in the city. If the series "Babylon Berlin" has a center of gravity, then it's the devilish club Moka Efti, where different languages and social strata form a cocktail of Russian revolutionaries, German nobles, crooks, police and night owls.

### **A Culture Clash in the Garden**

Chaos creates problems today, but it also points the way toward possible solutions. Immigration may be a strain on the city, but the scars of World War II and its Cold War division also provide some relief in the form of fallow land and open spaces, of which Berlin has far more than other metropolises. They are now being rediscovered, but they are also coming under economic pressure.

Berlin has a long tradition of allotment gardens, known as Schrebergärten, many of which contain small shacks for spending the night. They are the most German of all small German escapes — but they have an uncertain future. Berlin is home to almost 900 allotment garden colonies, which make up around 3 percent of the city's total area. Demand for these gardens is huge and candidates often have to spend several years on a waiting list to secure one.

Some garden colonies have even appointed integration officers, an apparently necessary step. A garden with the rather ironic name of "Peace," for example, has been a frequent site of dispute because members sought to reject applicants of Turkish origin by saying "they can't be integrated." That's nonsense, of course. If there's anything that can contribute to integration, it is spending time together among the carrot beds and fruit trees, a truth lived at other communal gardens in the city.

Such as the Allmende-Kontor at the vast Tempelhofer Feld park, an expanse established on the site of the now-closed Tempelhof Airport in the heart of the city. Students and creative types from the neighborhood started the urban gardening project here and were later joined by neighbors with Turkish roots as well as immigrants from some of the 190 other nationalities present in Berlin. In addition to kohlrabi and sunflowers, arguments are also cultivated here, a proclivity among nature lovers. Some gardeners with Turkish roots at times feel stifled by the aesthetic preconceptions of their ethnic German neighbors. They, in



turn, sometimes find their foreign neighbors to be a blight on the garden because they “drag all their stuff out of the basement” and clutter the flower beds with old bicycle frames, kitchen cabinets and plastic furniture.

But once they get everything off their chest, they meet again and chat over shisha or beer and share watering duties. These delicate green shoots of a cultivated debate culture are currently under immense pressure, because Berliners not only have the need to hang out in gardens, but an urgent need for thousands of apartments in a city that has been hit with a housing shortage. Several allotment gardens are slated to be bulldozed soon to make way for new apartment buildings.

All of these are individual projects that, at most, will affect a few thousand residents. The search for a larger debate on strategy invariably ends up sooner or later in a discussion with a Catholic priest.

In 2006, Leo Penta founded the German Institute for Community Organizing at the Catholic University of Applied Sciences in Berlin. On Sundays, the priest, a charismatic man with a full beard, celebrates the Holy Mass in English. He was born in New York in 1952 and became a priest at the age of 27, going on to fight misery in the slums in keeping with Catholic social teachings.

“When I started as a community organizer in Brooklyn in the 1970s, things there looked a lot worse than anything you could imagine here in Berlin,” Penta says. “The area called Brownsville and East New York was completely rundown and destroyed, almost like Dresden after the war.”

Penta has lived in Berlin for 22 years and he has been striving to establish methods of grassroots community organizing here as well.

When asked what he thinks about the inclusion of “stakeholders” in projects such as “Strategy 2030” in Berlin, he says: not much. “Citizen participation at the government’s initiative is usually either citizen participation light or an elite event,” he says.

Penta’s German is perfect and almost accent-free, making him an example of the integration paradox. Penta has made Berlin his home, and he wants to change things here. He may be a foreigner, but he’s here to stay — and establish new local traditions along the way.

His services are idiosyncratic. An altar server with a pony tail dressed in sneakers and a T-shirt assists him. People arriving a half-hour late are still welcome because the grassroots priest is perfectly aware that 10:30 a.m. is an ungodly hour on weekends in Berlin. It's only at around 11 a.m. that his chapel fills up, and he affably points latecomers to empty seats. After communion, the high point of the service comes when, rather than a sermon, everyone talks about the Bible — or simply about their personal experiences — with their Slavic, German or Italian accents.

Penta listens, talks, prods, and he believes the gospels are also about a kind of “counterculture.” His interpretation of the Bible is less about pure doctrine than about misunderstandings and squabbling between Jesus and his disciples. Penta asks his congregation over and over again: What do you think? “Yes” and “amen” don't seem to be his thing. Can what he's doing still even be counted as Roman-Catholic? Or is it more Berlin-Catholic?

Penta is also rather unorthodox in his approach to his second job as community organizer. In stark contrast to the city government's vision of citizen participation, he wants organic participation from below and within rather than ordered from the top and outside. When industry went into decline in the Schöneeweide district of eastern Berlin, the area was threatened with decay and unemployment. Snotty residents of central Berlin thumbed their noses at the district, acting as if it were a hopeless case. But Penta was familiar with the symptoms of crisis there from his years in Brooklyn. In 2000, he set about coordinating Germany's first civic platform: an alliance of 23 civil society groups, associations and church congregations.

Pentas' platform has helped shape the former industrial wasteland by, for example, successfully fighting for the establishment of part of the University of Applied Sciences (HTW) in the area. Today, Schöneeweide is teeming with thousands of students. Of course, citizen's groups can also have smaller goals — for example, his group's efforts to keep Berlin's oldest ferry connection in operation, the F11. While the Silicon Valley is turning to platform capitalism, Penta is banking on platform communitarianism.

He has already initiated four citizen alliances in the city — in Schöneeweide, Neukölln, Wedding-Moabit and Spandau — which together incorporate around 80 groups that claim to represent a combined 100,000 people. And they don't see

themselves as just harmless clubs for discussion, but aim to negotiate at eye level with district leaders and city officials.

Can the chaotic, rudderless Babylonia of Berlin become a laboratory for a new form of citizen involvement? All coordinated by a Catholic priest in the diaspora of a godless city where 60 percent of the residents are unaffiliated with any religion?

That, too, might be part of this city's laissez-faire approach — that in addition to all the other whackos, a Catholic priest can go ahead and do his thing in helping the deeply apostate Berlin society reinvent itself.

Penta's skepticism of big top-down visions seems to have hit a nerve — as exemplified by Tempelhofer Feld, the vast empty field right in the heart of the city. Once an airport, the city proposed turning it into a new city quarter once it was closed down in 2008. But what did Berliners want? It's not so easy to say. To approach an answer, it's best to visit the place.

## **Freedom**

Up until a decade ago, you could still fly from downtown Berlin to places like Vienna or Brussels. But in the 10 years that have passed since the last flight took off, not much has happened at the site. It is pretty much completely empty and it is so big that New York's Central Park could fit inside with plenty of room to spare. It is a huge luxury in a city where housing is becoming increasingly tight.

But in a 2014 referendum, voters decided to keep it as it is. They elected to change nothing. No apartment buildings on the edges, no international garden exhibition, no lake, no mountain, no rocks. Critics complain that the city isn't even allowed to put in bathrooms and park benches.

The vote was essentially the people of Berlin thumbing their noses at turbo-capitalism, which was threatening to chew up the city's open spaces after having already transformed the real estate market into an El Dorado for speculators. It was a huge, loud rejection of change.

And it was fueled by the dream of creating a vast oasis, perhaps the biggest in the world located right in the center of a metropolis, a place where everyone can come together and relax, long-time Berliners and recent newcomers alike. A place where everyone can do more or less as they please.

The only things in the park are the two runways through the middle, a few trees here and there and a six-kilometer-long strip of pavement around the outside, with a string of red dots marking the best route for those biking or running the loop.

It has become a utopia for the stressed-out residents of the capital who yearn for the outdoors, for peace and quiet, for expansiveness, for a view of something other than the gray buildings and dour faces that otherwise dominate the cityscape. It has turned into an unregulated place of myriad possibilities in a constantly growing city — right where Adolf Hitler held a massive demonstration of his power on May 1, 1933, a place where warplanes were assembled underground during World War II. And a place where American planes landed during the Berlin Airlift, saving West Berlin from the Soviet blockade.

“That is the fascinating thing about Berlin,” says the Oscar-winning British actress Helen Mirren as she looks out over the field. “This city continually redefines historical places.” For the episodic feature film “Berlin, I Love You,” which will hit the theaters next year, Mirren filmed a part about the refugees who are sheltered at the old airport. “It is fantastic to have such a space where everyone can be themselves. It would be unthinkable in London.”

In fact, a kind of mini-Germany has taken shape at Tempelhofer Feld. It seems just as compartmentalized as the country at large, despite the referendum. It seems that every segment of the population has carved out a section of their own and lives their own reality there, separated from the rest of the world.

In one corner is the dog exercise area, essentially a vast kennel where men and women throw balls for their pets and stand at the edge smoking and watching the action. Then there are the small parcels set aside for the urban gardeners, so small that tears of sympathy well up when you think of the older rental-gardens elsewhere in the city, rejected for their uncoolness by many newer Berliners.

In the southwestern corner of Tempelhofer Feld, a Segway rental company has cordoned off its own section, a necessary measure to teach the lurching tourists how to ride the things. Next door is a go-kart rental. And a place to rent tiny electric cars. Each recreational-vehicle collection behind its own fence.

There is also a piece of asphalt for the oddballs with their drones and remote-control cars. Signs denote where the area for skate-sailing begins and ends.

Toward one side of the field is an area reserved for barbecuing, though it isn't fenced off — nor does it need to be. In the summer, the smoke creates its own kind of barrier.

For a good portion of the year, a huge chunk of the field is blocked off for skylarks, with signs noting that it is the only place left for them to breed. And this fall, a shepherd drove his sheep through the dried out, brown landscape for a week, with two dogs keeping the herd together and not a single fence to block their path. There were only the two runways — the shepherd calling to make sure it was okay before crossing them.

There is one, slightly larger clump of trees that has been taken over by mountain bikers — and it is generally frowned upon when lovers wander into the copse of trees. It is one of the few areas in the park that offers a bit of privacy. It's for riding, not romance.

There's also an area for pot smokers, though it isn't fenced off. In the evenings, the clouds of cannabis smoke are almost as thick as the ones over in the barbecue corner.

There is a small rise that offers the kind of sunset view that you can't find anywhere else in the city. In the evenings, everyone lies in the grass and watches as the sharply divided areas of the park slowly disappear into the gathering darkness.

Far away, on the other side of the field, are a bunch of white containers, a small village for the refugees. They, too, are behind a fence. But to ensure that residents don't have to look through the mesh, a one-meter-high catwalk has been built along the fence around the village, allowing for an unobstructed view.

Tempelhof freedom. Berlin's utopia. Berlin's empty center. Everyone together, but to each their own.

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