

EPISODE 4 - "We Are Here, Baby": DIY Renovations & the Right to the City

[HANK AUDIO]

There were always these like weird little things, You know, like very unique or special, Unexpected encounters. And people who are trying to create spaces for themselves and other people like themselves with the most love possible.

Hi, my name is Maya Justine Green, and you're listening to SQUAT, or, The Radical Community Builders of Reunified Berlin.

[INTRO MUSIC]

Welcome to episode 4! The end is in sight... but we have a lot to discuss before we get there. We know from the first episode that squatting was made possible by contested property claims after the fall of the wall, especially in East Berlin where many decaying buildings had unclear ownership. We know from the second episode that a shift towards neoliberalism was leading to gentrification in the same underinvested neighborhoods that people were squatting in. Finally, we discussed last episode that against the backdrop of this changing city, squatters conducted their day-to-day lives in ways *counter* to the dominant society. But we're missing a pretty important piece of the puzzle that explains how they were able to do this.

In his book *Metropolitan Preoccupations*, the Oxford geographer Alexander Vasudevan argues that you have to use his discipline to truly understand the history of squatting in Berlin, which he sums up as "a series of spatial practices aimed at creating alternative livable places that are themselves tied to particular forms of activism and empowerment."¹

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So today, our objective is quite simple: we will assess the spatial practices of squatting. How did squatters transform the spaces they squatted to meet their needs? Furthermore, what did this transformation of space symbolize, both for them and the other people living in Berlin? When conflict emerged, what did the state do about it, and what does that response tell us about who has a right to space in the city?

[Transition - music]

We can start by better situating ourselves in *our* city of study, Berlin, and thinking about what it looked like in this time period. Kay was really helpful in setting the scene for Berlin as a place kind of inherently open to modification.

[KAY AUDIO]

I always thought it was such a creative place, unbelievable. Yeah. And historically Berlin went through so many stages and, you know, burned down and bombed and then again, like kind of in this tent capsule when I basically went there and then This phoenix again, yeah, involving into this really big international city again.

Maya: The phoenix metaphor is a good one.

Kay Weber: Yeah, and it's always like a self invention. So, in such weird ways, you know. Yeah, there's always so much space for everything, you know. Like, all these different movements, like you said. The queer movement, the feminist movement. The leftists, they're all there and doing stuff. And there's space for it, you know. And it's okay, you know. And everyone is kind of fine

with that. Berlin felt always like that it is rough in many ways, but also so much more tolerant than other places, at least German cities I know.

Understanding Berlin as a city that is really customizable and resilient through conflict explains a lot about how it could be a good home for this kind of squatters' movement. But we're still speaking about space really abstractly — space for the queer movement, space for the leftists. What did this space actually look like?

[KAY AUDIO]

So there were a lot of communities, uh, together at we, I, I remember visiting very different spaces, you know, sometimes really like old flats, uh, beautiful, like Berlin high ceiling areas and, you know, bigger spaces.

And then, um, this industrial areas, they were like, they were just, uh, really amazing because they had this place, you go from the Paulinckel Ufer where you have all the coffee places and the channel and all that stuff, the water. And then you go into the Ersten Hinterhof, the court, and then you go from there in the side door and then you go up four floors and then there's this huge loft, you know, it's unbelievable, really hidden.

And then Berlin was always like that. I felt, you never know where you're going, there's always something else and around the corner and the gate and the staircase. And to the left, it was always like a labyrinth of a city, like urban living was so adventurous, you know, in a, in a very big way.

Kay really captures a sense I felt while I was in Berlin — that I could go anywhere, and that there might be something amazing hiding in this alleyway or through this archway. It's the freest I've felt in a place that I've lived. I also want to highlight his

mention of industrial space, because I think this is a logistical point that's important to understand about the city.

At least among a privileged American university-aged population doing things like studying abroad, a strong part of Berlin's attraction is its gritty leather-clad techno scene where pretty much anything goes. As established and intractable as that feels now—Berlin's techno scene actually has Unesco status²— it was as much a reaction to the fall of the Berlin Wall as squatting was. Let me explain. In the same way that a world war and the abolishment of private property and the partitioning of a global capital was disruptive for private property owners, it also rocked the boat a bit for industry. A lot of business left Berlin in the Cold War period, and as such, many spaces like department stores, warehouses, and factories lost their function. Post-reunification, these dark cavernous places were the perfect place for underground raves that could pop up one night and then change locations the next pretty spontaneously. This was a breeding ground for the emerging music genre of techno, creating a scene that some squatters we know even engaged in.³

[BASTIAN AUDIO]

The thing is that, uh, all in the nineties, It was so confusing for all of us, um, what to do and there was a kind of a collective, um, move into the, uh, growing modern technical scene. And we all did. And I worked for it like 10 years, like as a bouncer, organizer, and dj, blah blah. And, this was funny because it helps a lot, you know, and this was the nineties, you know, and, I mean, for me personally, after being evicted in Mainzer Straße and, and moving back to class was not an idea, idea of doing any career, you know? Yeah. So, so techno thing was perfect.

² <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20240322-berlin-techno-scene-gains-unesco-status>

³ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/2159032X.2015.1126132>

We'll revisit how Bastian navigated being evicted from his squat before this episode is out, but the more relevant point here is that post-industrial abandoned space was being utilized in all sorts of ways in Berlin after reunification, in ways that really came to define the city's character. So when Kay is talking about how the city has space for this, that, and that — sure, we can interpret that abstractly, but he also means it pretty literally. There were a lot of decrepit buildings not meant for any clear industrial, residential, or recreational use, laying around.

Obviously, the good squatters of Berlin were not going to let that go to waste. And in fact, as Kay is about to share, they were quite ingenious in repurposing these structures to make them livable.

[KAY AUDIO]

We're always in these amazing places where we try to change things. We, we left things raw, but we also painted and hung curtains and made a lot of things happening. They did a lot of little construction modification was very like, you know, can we take the wall out? Do you know an architect? Can the architect see if that's a carrying wall and can we take it down and how we can take it down and what we do instead and then connecting windows, finding old windows and putting them there instead of a wall and and all of that.

there was so much construction stuff going on, like people took, did stuff that was not always okay. So you had to really kind of find a way to really involve people who know what they're doing, you know, and then it was often the case that, you know, don't do it. If you don't know about all that stuff, don't do it.

MAYA: But people, people felt a freedom, I guess, to like change the space.

Sometimes that is, no [shakes head]

MAYA: too much,

but I liked some things they did, like in that apartment, uh, there was, they were, like I said, like four, four big studios, you know, and each studio was at least like the coffee space, like here or larger. It was amazing. And then they had a little bathroom and then they built the bathroom. So in the bathroom, they built part of one studio with, there was a bathtub and a sink, and then they built windows all around it with curtains. You could either leave it open or close it. But you had the bathroom basically in a, like in a fish tank.

[laughing]

MAYA: That's funny.

Yeah, it is. A lot of these things were surprisingly funny and imaginative. And that's what I love about it. There were so many surprises.

Bastian validated what Kay shared, because he literally was knocking down walls in the Tunttenhaus.

[BASTIAN AUDIO]

And the, the first month I think was like, trying to establish ourselves there. Mm-hmm. A lot of, we have finally five washing machines or something like this, which, we gave six washing machines, spare washing machines, to the other squatters and fridges and things like this.

And then we did like, make, make out of two smaller rooms, a bigger room, you know? Which professional whatever sealing, steam something. And so we can like, have a big table to, to eat together with and have breakfast and

meet a living room. And then people will start to, establish themselves in their, rooms. And then also the electricity and, uh, was done, you know? Yeah. Which was, important and,

As someone who has consumed a good amount of HGTV, I was super impressed by this. I mean, there's definitely a parallel to be drawn there. The squatters were do-it-yourself house flippers!

[BASTIAN AUDIO]

we are, we are kind of lucky that the building was quite, just was in kind of Good, um, state, you know. Yeah. It was not bad. It was no rain in the roof or something, and the water were dry. Yeah. And, uh, and everything pretty, the doors. And this was nothing destroyed. And even there was like electric cables. We just need to connect here. Yeah. And, um, telephone, you know.

MAYA: Did you have to learn a lot of construction?

The funny thing is like, it's not Yeah. Well, I used to work in construction sites and my friend Louis and some others, Uh, completely professional, um, electricians, so

MAYA: Oh wow, okay.

These renovations were not simply just to hook up to electricity or create bigger rooms, though the importance of those things should not be understated. Drawing on a legacy east of the wall, these post-reunification squatted spaces shared a lot in common with the communal apartments of the Soviet bloc, which featured “places of communal use,” an ethos of “mutual responsibility,” and a utopian vision of community. However, rather than functioning as a tool of social control and

surveillance, the communal living space of the squat was entirely determined by the residents, who were actively choosing to be there.⁴ Furthermore, to quote an activist featured in *Metropolitan Preoccupations*, “[Radical] politics was no longer confined to the living room as was the case for all those years during the GDR.”⁵

Instead, squatters also modified these abandoned buildings to create really innovative sites of community gathering. Art centers, print shops, record stores, bicycle repair shops, cafes, children’s clubs — these are just some of the ways that radical politics spilled out of the living room and even onto the street, engaging the broader neighborhood. These spaces were part of the anarchist infoshop tradition, which sought to spread radical ideas by creating spaces for people to acquire tools of self-reliance and state resistance instead of relying on dense theory. In sharing how this model influenced their queer barbershop, Butchcut, Hank offered a useful explanation of how these infoshops worked.

[HANK AUDIO]

And, um, it's a crossover of that idea of a barbershop as a community space and the info shops that every squat sort of had, usually in the basement, those info shops were a crossover of like, A library, sort of, a cafe, because you could always, there was always a kettle somewhere and you could just make yourself a tea or coffee for, usually tea because we ran out of coffee, but um, just for like 20 cent donation or something and then there was a grimy couch and somebody was sitting already on it with a dog and then you walked in and looked at all the leaflets and flyers to find out where the next party is or the next demo or whatever, find more information and then you would walk in there and be like, Oh, what's, Oh, that's a cute dog.

⁴ Boym

⁵ Pg 145

And then, you know, there was all this information. And you went in there to get the information, but you would always end up with a new friend. Yeah. Because there was always sitting somebody who then was ready, had time for a chat.

I study education in addition to urban studies, so this idea of the infoshop was one of the coolest things that emerged from these interviews for me. It made me start thinking about these squats as spaces of learning, and diverse kinds of learning at that... Reading a book, building a relationship, and leading a renovation project were all treated as equally valid.

I read an article in my history of education class which argued that modifying the environment around you takes tremendous skill, and evaluating the stories of a place and a community's relationship to it yields a lot of evidence of learning. "Placemaking is making history," the author Adrea Lawrence said, "and placemaking begets learning." She was actually talking about precolonial Indigenous education, but while I was reading I kept making notes in the margins, like "this applies to the squatters in Berlin!!"

Again showing how learning and community building were intertwined in these by-squatters-for-squatters spaces, here's Bastian on the infoshops in the Tuntenhaus:

[BASTIAN AUDIO]

Anyway, so then we had a bar. Mm-hmm. We opened, I think of the first gay bar, uh uh, which was completely different than the one from gdr. And uh, you have kind of a dark room there and just gay. It was so funny cause our policies there was like to open our ourself because our, our idea was like to

make all the heterosexuals more gay or whatever. Queer. Queer. So, um, everyone was invited into the garden bar and even was invited to our house for dinner. Cause we big dinners, you know? Mm-hmm. And so I remember when, like, uh, east German workers from the neighborhood after their job that came to our bar and [laughs] beer too hard. And then some queens were serving it. So this was kind of a, of the spirit and the, and the, uh, utopia of these days that, s things in a broader way in east Germany can be brought to a good end, you know? Then they had this bookstore established in our house and, uh,

MAYA: wow. Bookstore, bar,

bar and uh, and says, it's so amazing. You see? Like, it's like, how could we do it? I mean, usually you need years for doing this.

Echoing Bastian, I want to give squatters their flowers, because running a bookstore and bar in your house actually takes an insane demonstration of design skill and business savvy. I'm thinking back to our conversation last episode about how squatters put tremendous amounts of labor into crafting these spaces. They were fully capable of working hard and playing hard, though, as demonstrated here by Hank:

[HANK AUDIO]

you had this space where you could create whatever you wanted. And people made like crazy parties with crazy decorations, and debauchery, and orgies, and I don't know. I don't know how much you want to hear about that.

MAYA: No, it's all interesting.

We actually didn't end up talking much more about that, but honestly the point of these spaces was that they didn't have to seek anyone's approval, yours and mine included! Of course, they weren't taking over these spaces for the sole purposes of having fun. We know from last episode that there were deep values and principled visions underlying what the squatters were doing. In fact, pulling on a larger theoretical framework again, we can interpret these physical modifications of the squatters as them claiming a right to the city.

This is an idea that originally came from the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, but it has definitely made it into the mainstream. It's been used to advocate for affordable housing, public parks, even refugee facilities, and since it is used so often, it's been pointed out that, like neoliberalism, people can say throw around a right to the city without being clear what they mean. When I say squatters claimed a right to the city, I mean that they shifted power over urban space away from capital and the state, and towards themselves as urban inhabitants.⁶ After reunification, Berlin was changing, and through squatting, people attempted to steer that change instead of just letting it happen to them.

Lefebvre was a Marxist, so he mostly considered this right through the lens of class, but opening up this framework to different axes of identities greatly expands its relevance — for example, queer squatting could be a way to challenge the heteronormative capitalist city.⁷ Exercising their right to the city means squatters viewed urban space as “places of the possible” and built, or at least tried to build, the power to realize those possibilities.⁸ The right to the city is not an individual

⁶ Purcell 101-2

⁷ Purcell 106

⁸ Lefebvre 156

right, but a collective one... the geographer David Harvey calls it "a right to change ourselves by changing the city."⁹

The Tuntenhaus was an example of this, aiding squatters in articulating their identities through the strategic use of space. Here's Bastian explaining a particularly cool tactic they used:

[BASTIAN AUDIO]

in between these days what we did is like lots of my comrades just, you know, getting drunk, you know, every Saturday morning. I hate it. Like can you do the washing? Washing? But now I understand. So you say I get in drag and go down to the street. Mm-hmm. Just walk here and walk there in like a boulevard of Queens and it was so brilliant because then it was made clear to everybody else who was coming there as a neighbor.

New squatters said, we are here baby. So

MAYA: yeah. Not hiding in the house.

So I understand it was fucking good idea to do it.

Though promenading down the street in drag doesn't permanently leave a mark, *use of space* also communicates a claim to onlookers. And there were onlookers, since of course, queer squatters were not the only ones trying to stake a claim on post-reunified Berlin. Returning to Lefebvre, he said, "In the urban context, struggles between fractions, groups, and classes strengthen the feeling of belonging... These groups are rivals in their love for the city."¹⁰ That's a warm and

⁹ Harvey 23

¹⁰ Lefebvre 67

fuzzy spin, but this rivalry could certainly take a toll on the squatters. Here's Kay on that:

[KAY AUDIO]

You have conflict with the police. You have conflict with the ownership. You have conflict with your friends. You have conflict all around. And that's just the way of life. And you have to be prepared every day to be a victim. It's very rough. Very difficult. And if you don't make the best of the moment, you will miss out.

What happened when this conflict got violent?

[transition - MUSIC]

If we're thinking about the role that violence played in the post-reunification moment, the first thing to understand is that there was a lot of it.

[HANK AUDIO]

there was a lot of neo fascism in the East, at that time, and the squats were attacked by Nazis regularly. And so we were organizing against that and fighting against that, so we also had a network with the squats that were close to us, that we could call in the case of a Nazi attack, that we would all...

Just get dressed and run over there with a baseball bat and, um, you know, kick the shit out of these fuckers , which never actually happened, but we were like constantly ready for that. Yeah. Okay. I know that other people, that some people did have to, um, confront and were in fights with Nazis.

Mm-hmm. , but I actually, I wasn't like, I was fighting much more with like, regular straight dudes on the street than with Nazis, you know?

That was Hank, explaining how violence was a constant possibility in the squats. Queer squatters, you might imagine, were uniquely vulnerable.

[HANK AUDIO]

they were fighting against the machos in the squats and they were fighting against the police who was against the squats in general. And they were fighting with people in the streets that were trying to attack us. Yeah. So it was a bit very stressful life.

There wasn't consensus about how to respond to this, whether to fight fire with fire or not. Some, like Kay, opted for non-violent approaches.

[KAY AUDIO]

And it was really complicated, which way you promote change in the society and how far you go. I figured out over the time there that I, I really, I really don't like, uh, violence, but I'm fine with disobedience.

I really learned, uh, to be in demonstrations where I have been carried away and with a lot of fear and all that, but I, I would go that far to, to, to deny certain orders, you know, but I wouldn't really throw anything or fight or anything.

Maya: You had like a personal code of conduct.

Yeah. Yeah. Very, very, and I learned that there. I learned that in, basically in Berlin.

...

I wanted to you know Negotiate and talk but I didn't want to- i'm not out there to fight and throw things and all that. So sometimes I was in the wrong place And I just needed to Myself So that happened a lot, you know?

Maya: Yeah. Wow.

'cause then, uh, police squads came and there were a lot of things happening and anytime I, you know, had this feeling, I just don't want to be part of the crowd. I don't need to see it. I just need to be safe. Mm-hmm. and stuff. So it was like these both ends, you know?

From this response, we can see that some squatters might have been adverse to violence for both ideological and very pragmatic safety reasons. However, others felt differently. For Bastian on Mainzer Straße, a location I point out because it's really important to this discussion of violence, the landscape of reunification gave him new insight into how the state utilized violence, which in turn justified violence as a tool of resistance.

[BASTIAN AUDIO]

Bastian: For me personally, I learned a lot in these days, you know? I learned a lot about resisting to the state, like doing some bad violence, and a lot about how the German Democratic Republic functions in these days. And how, the party works and how the administration works, how the police worked and—

Maya: I guess these aren't things you really knew being in West Germany .

Bastian: cause I didn't hear it, yes.

The archives I visited in Berlin had newspaper clippings that can help make this discussion of violence a little more concrete. Within a 6 month period, one article I found connected squatters in Friedrichshain to arson of a squatted building, setting 2 construction vehicles and a construction container on fire as well, damaging a police vehicle, and injuring 4 police officers during a confrontation at a festival.¹¹ I can't really speak to how representative this article is or isn't of resistance tactics from squatters, but I will say that after living through the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, I'm very wary of a handful of instances of property damage being used to delegitimize an entire movement.

The question that lingered with me after those long months of marches and again after sorting through these archival materials was this: who has the right to violence?

Then and now, it seems that the state is able to get away with a lot more than ordinary civilians. For example, two articles I found described a police operation on Kreuziger Straße in which 200 officers stormed and combed through a squat that at the time of the eviction housed 9 squatters. In this case, the operation was prompted by a property owner's complaint, and non-squatter bystanders were quoted as thinking the degree of force used was excessive.¹²

Other articles, though, showed that non-squatter neighbors sometimes attempted to use violence against squatters to remove them, with the logic that as paying residents, they had more right to their neighborhoods than the squatters did. One article reported on the circulation of anonymous pamphlets that called for the "immediate eviction of all squatted houses, with or without rental contracts," and

¹¹ "Die lange List der Gewalttaten" [The long list of violent acts]

¹² "Räumung: 200 Polizisten gingen gegen neun Hausbesetzer vor" [Eviction: 200 Police Officers Take Action Against Nine Squatters] and "Besetztes Haus geräumt" [Squatted House cleared]

had threats to follow up on that call with vigilante violence.¹³ Alternatively, residents of squatted neighborhoods formed citizens' initiatives that called on district officials to authorize the police to violently evict squatters on their behalf.¹⁴

As Kay said, conflict was a way of life, and the squatters I talked to were pretty matter-of-fact about this just being a reality of existing in this time. Squatters demonstrated real resiliency in their attempts to claim a right to the city even under these conditions... but as the squatters' movement not really being around anymore might suggest, state intervention would increasingly make this impossible.

[TRANSITION - MUSIC]

We can't talk about police violence in the squatters' movement without talking about the eviction of Mainzer Straße. It's been alluded to a lot throughout this series, but I want to tell the narrative outright, drawing mainly on *Metropolitan Preoccupations* and supplementing with some other archival sources.

The first wave of squatting after the fall of the Berlin Wall in November '89 was largely composed of East German squatters. Squatters from West Berlin started crossing the border to squat in East Berlin's empty properties in January 1990, and slowly grew to become a majority of those squatting. By spring of 1990, the Friedrichshain neighborhood was a squatting hotspot, as we've discussed. After plans from a West Berlin housing speculator to redevelop wide swaths of the neighborhood were leaked, a radical journal circulating at the time called *Interim* put out a call to occupy several empty houses on Mainzer Straße before these plans could be put into action.

¹³ "Zerstochene Reifen und ein Anti-Terror-Anruf" [Slashed Tires and an Anti-Terror-Call]

¹⁴ "Alternatives Wohnen, ja..." [Alternative Living, yes...]

Remember from Episode 2 that gentrification was a real threat to many East Berlin neighborhoods. Bastian and the Tuntenhaus were part of a larger mobilization to resist this, and they occupied Mainzer Straße Vier, or 4, on May 1, 1990. By the summer of 1990, over 250 squatters called the street home and began negotiations with the East Berlin city council demanding the city commit to 1) not evicting them and 2) terminating an earlier contract they'd agreed to with neo-Nazi squatters. It quickly became clear, though, that the council was stalling until the nation's legal reunification in October, when these squatters in East Berlin would become West Berlin's problem. Sure enough, in November, when evictions occurred in a different neighborhood, the Mainzer Straße squatters attempted a solidarity demonstration and were met with a wall of police equipped with water cannons, tear gas, and stun grenades. Rumors circulated that similar to the Cop City complex being challenged by protests in Atlanta right now, police had been using a ghost town on the outskirts of the city to practice subduing squatters.

The squatters had been doing their own preparations, though, and responded with stones, flares, and Molotov cocktails. Maybe most impactfully, and again showing their design know-how, they constructed barricades with guidance from an architect. In the end, it took 3000 police, 10 water cannons, and a squad of helicopters to successfully clear all the occupied houses on Mainzer Straße, with over 400 arrests made. I recommend the film *The Battle of Tuntenhaus* to really see this playing out. It's available for free online, and I'll link it with the citations and transcript.

I share this story for a few reasons. One is to make a point that Bastian himself made in episode 2. I'll play it again here:

[BASTIAN AUDIO]

in the beginning of the fall, like , in a global way, like things, there was no east German money left. There was [00:23:00] reunification day, October 3rd, and, what was, a major, um, start of the planning of the election when, uh, the West Berlin authorities took over the east Berlin authorities, and when finally police forces from East and West were put together. And a Western German command of course, which, um enabled them , to Invictus. Evict us. And, there definitely was political will to do so because there were, because for them, so many, uh, buildings were squatted in East Berlin, like 200 something. And this especially this, um, Mainzer Straße, So, so they decided to get rid of us. Reunification day was all ch land, whatever was the symbolic [00:24:00] reunification. But the real reunification was the eviction. Cause then as a new state could like, uh, show that there has a power

Maya: Ooh, okay

Bastian: state power, see, now. Which is for a nation building always important. Whaaa

Maya: A way for them to flex

The real reunification of the German state was this eviction, Bastian said, because it showed who really had the power moving forward. Remember, claiming a right to the city is all about shifting power, so for the state to crack down on the squatters in this way, with 3000 police officers, the squatters must have successfully challenged the city's power structures.

Following this thread of how successful the squatters were or weren't, the other reason it's important for us to talk about Mainzer Straße is because to some, this eviction is the moment it was determined that the squatters weren't going to be

successful in the long run. Alexander Vasudevan actually argues that this is the end of the post-reunification squatters' movement — that after this moment it's never as strong or as connected.

I don't agree that this was the end — remember that at the moment of this eviction, Hank, one of the central voices of this podcast, wasn't going to start squatting in Berlin for another seven years. But I agree that at least that this marked a real shift.

In *Metropolitan Preoccupations*, Vasudevan says that “the brutality of the expulsions was greeted by an overwhelming sense of despair, exhaustion and powerlessness.”¹⁵ If squatting was an attempt to take control of the forces of urban change rippling through Berlin after the fall of the wall, then more than just expressing the might of the German state, this eviction also communicated that resistance was futile.

[BASTIAN AUDIO]

the years afterwards were really heavy, you know? Yeah. It was really not good. it was hard for all of us. I didn't, there was a new Tunten that I didn't move to, Uh, it's like it takes so long to get over it. Bit traumatic and

MAYA: Yeah. Like grief, you lost something.

You don't know. There was no perspective what we can do.

The Tuntenhaus only existed for six months, but reflecting on all that Bastian has shared so far in this series, or even in this episode alone, it is easy to understand how transformative living there must have been, and what a loss it was to leave.

On one of my last days in Germany, I went to see Mainzer Straße myself.

¹⁵ MP pg 167

[MAYA AUDIO]

Okay, I'm walking down Mainzer Strasse, um, passing a job center. Looks like a nice new building. Um, there's a grocery store and a lot of construction up the mouth of the street. I think the end of the street is where I started, and now I'm walking up, um, I believe that's kind of like that first block that was squatted.

I'm making my way towards the area that was squatted, including the Tuntenhaus.

Yeah, if I was just walking down this street without the context of purposefully scoping out these ex squats, I'd say it's just a very ordinary street in Berlin.

You don't have to have experienced eviction to imagine how Bastian or other squatters might have perceived the total erasure of what they accomplished. I was reminded of how I feel when I go back to Charleston during school breaks. Even without the memories of violent police clashes, there's something devastating about seeing hallmark institutions of my childhood replaced with big box chains and breweries. In my opinion, all change involves loss, and all loss must be grieved.

This grief is not the end of the story, though.

Judith Butler, the queer icon and philosopher, says that loss can be socially and politically generative, and that lost places in particular can be "the very condition for the articulation of new political horizons."¹⁶

¹⁶ Vasudevan 167

In the case of the squatters in Berlin, the loss of the Mainzer Straße squats marked a change in tactics. If violence could not protect their right to the city, negotiation with the state was a necessary evil. Berlin-wide negotiations had proven not to work, so over the next decade, squatters sought to legalize their occupancy through individual agreements with property owners and policy makers at the district level.

Renovations now served a dual purpose. They still provided an opportunity for squatters to create urban space that met their needs, but they also helped make a case for the squats' value — to the state that couldn't afford to maintain the derelict buildings of East Berlin themselves, to the market, which was always seeking to cut costs and maximize profit, and even to skeptical neighbors.

One archival article I found described an open house event a squat hosted for their neighborhood. "We want to break the one-sided image of stone-throwing chaos and show what the people in this house have achieved," one squatter was quoted as saying. Turnout was limited, but one person who did attend was a lawyer representing the Swiss consortium who owned the property, come to negotiate. *He* was quoted as saying, "We want to get rid of the house, that way, we can avoid all the hassle."¹⁷

I want to acknowledge that it might be misguided to suggest the quality of squatters' renovations played a major role in whether they were able to get legalized or not. In fact, according to Hank, the less desirable a property was, the easier it was for the squat to last a while:

[HANK AUDIO]

¹⁷ "Mehr als eine Heimwerker-Idylle" [More Than a DIY Paradise]

Um, that was Rigaer Straße. Uh, 63, I think, um, on the corner that was evicted recently. And it was also one one of the longest running squats. Yes. It wasn't because people were best organized. It was just because nobody cared about this house for a long time because it was like, there were so many conflicts in that house. Like I can't even, it was a big drama house, but because it was also one of the less attractive houses in terms of how run down it was, it was always like women and queers sort of lived there for a really long time and then they just sort of claimed it, I guess.

I don't think it's wrong to view these legalized squats as fundamentally different from the squats that were evicted. I mean, it's fair to ask, is a legalized squat even really a thing? If squatting is occupying abandoned properties and using them in illegal ways, then maybe legalized squatting is just renting with a quirky origin story. The alternative approaches to land and living together that these squatters tried to dream up were forced to conform to the vision of the state and the market, with violence hanging over their head as a very real possibility if they stepped out of line.

Even more disillusioning is the way that by the early 2000s, Berlin had capitalized on squatting and the countercultural use of temporary spaces as a way to build its brand as a city and aid the very processes of neoliberal restructuring that the squatters were resisting to begin with.¹⁸

In episode 3, Bastian refers to squatting as a collective dream, and you could argue that that's the perfect metaphor, because eventually they had to wake up. Through this lens, I definitely see where Vasudevan is coming from when he argues that the eviction of Mainzer Straße is the end of the movement.

¹⁸ Vasudevan 173-4

To me though, this fails to capture the whole story. For one, the legalized squats that existed past this point, and in some cases still exist, have a radical value to the people who live in them.

[KAY AUDIO]

My, my friend Angelika, she still lives in, in, in a squatted house. Oh, wow. Yeah. Yeah. She lives in a squatted house on Gorlitzer Straße, right at the park, and they moved in there, uh, in, in the nineties. and,

MAYA: and, and still, and still she lives

and have it as a, as a, as a community, they, they have the house, they own the house, and they, she lives there since, I think since 90, yeah, 92,

MAYA: wow,

91, 92?

MAYA: That's awesome,

it's amazing, right, and she still lives there. And it's just the most beautiful thing, because you are up there on the, on the fourth floor but you overlook the whole Gorlitzer park with everything. And it's, it's just a beautiful apartment. And there's still, I think, two of the original people that live there. She and another guy. And then two other people. So that's amazing.

MAYA: That is amazing.

After all these years. And so, but she never got married, she never had a family, um, but she, yeah, but she loves to live there. It's really, she feels really at home there. Yeah. It's really interesting. So that's one of the historic

little, you know, diamonds that came out of that squatter movements that people still own buildings and as a group, as a collective, and they still have a house that they own and they turned it into something really, really nice.

MAYA: Yeah. That's so cool.

So it survived.

You could make the argument that that benefit is felt by a really small amount of people, which is fair, but even if we accept the squatters' movement as ending in 1990, or 2000, or whenever we draw the cut off, the fact that it did end is not in itself evidence of its failure.

Part of the magic of these communities lies in their ephemerality, or the way they met the moment they were intended for and faded away. The genius of these squatters rested in their ability to develop a set of political and cultural tools that were tailored for the nuances of their particular occupation of time and space. They utilized the authentic relationships they had with the people around them, the open spaces of their urban context, and the "unprecedented" moment they were in to create something that both served their needs in the moment and reveled in the open possibilities of the future.

And that future is still open! Something that really fascinated me during my time in Germany was that there were so many interesting models for co-living — at least compared to America, where the mainstream imagination doesn't really go beyond sharing an apartment with some friends when you're in your twenties.

In the housing cooperative model, or Genossenschaften, a legal entity funded through the purchase of shares buys a property. Shareholders are then members of the cooperative and have a lifelong right to live on and use the property, which is

managed by an elected board. You can enter or exit the cooperative by buying or selling shares, and if all shareholders agree, the property can be sold.

If that's a little corporate sounding for your taste, there's also the Tenement Housing Syndicate, or Miethäusersyndikat, model, which former squatters came up with. The syndicate is a central LLC, or limited liability company, which manages a common solidarity fund and partners with groups that want to form self-organized housing projects. Similarly to the cooperative model, those groups form companies that buy a property, but the major difference is that the syndicate is also a shareholder and can prevent the property from ever being sold. Theoretically, that means that projects pursued through this model are permanently removed from capitalist circulation and are not at risk for being commodified.

Finally, there's also the building group model, or Baugruppen. In this model, a group of people bypass the traditional housing developer and pool their funds to buy a plot of land and construct shared housing. They work with architects to design private dwelling units and communal spaces that are compatible with their individual needs and collective values. While it's possible to sell your individual unit, the building itself is owned collectively by all the residents.

An urban studies alum actually made me aware of this model before I even started my thesis research and I thought it was really interesting, so in the Intermediate German class I took while abroad, I presented on Baugruppen when we had to pick an aspect of German culture to share. Through this, I learned that my professor actually lived in a Baugruppe! It was only a 2 person class, so at the end of the quarter she took us to visit and it was so cool. They had a shared kitchen, garden, play structure for the kids, studio space that could be used for art or exercise... The group had also had a shared love of bicycling and sustainability, which yielded

design choices like an elevator big enough to hold multiple bikes and no designated parking lot.

It's hard to say conclusively whether any of these alternative housing models are the direct result of squatting, but a Baugruppe member described the model as "a solution for the moment, when the city is not acting as it should," which certainly sounds like familiar logic.¹⁹

The existence of these alternative housing models gives me hope, because in my opinion, the true value of the collective dream of squatting is that it makes other dreams possible. The right to the city that the squatters claimed was not the completion of a revolution, but the beginning of one.²⁰

[KAY AUDIO]

But like this squatter movement is like this, everyone is thrown in a pot. It's stirred around. It bubbles a lot. And it's, yeah, it's very dramatic, uh, I think, and the beauty of it was that it was very dramatic, in many ways. But I think it really gave Berlin the... The energy and the thing to move forward, you know? And to become, again, a really big cultural city, you know? With many adventures.

This is feeling a little conclusive, and in some ways, the story I'm telling of Berlin is coming to a close. But from the start I promised a 5-episode series, and we're not done quite yet. Trust, there was a whole world out there that the squatters were in conversation with, and there are some important reflections to be drawn from that part of the story that indicate how we can use the lessons from the squatters to move forward.

¹⁹ Metropolis

²⁰ Purcell 100

Plus, I still haven't told you the story of my visit to a legalized squat!

All that and more on the next and final episode of SQUAT: or the radical community builders of reunified Berlin. I'm Maya Justine Green, and as always, access to citations and a full transcript can be found in the episode description, or at mayajustinegreen.com/squat.