

7.1 **The challenges for cultural spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic: collaborative spaces and temporary uses in Berlin**

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× **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an enormous impact on the cultural sector of several cities, with facilities having to close or drastically diminish their capacity over time. This paper focus on possible alternatives to mitigate the negative impacts of future crises by looking into digital options and small-scale collaborative spaces in Berlin, Germany. Often considered a paradigm for a 'creative city,' Berlin possesses several temporary subcultural spaces reflective of its carefully constructed authentic image. Aware that its urban brand would suffer immensely with another shutdown, cultural producers have made some specific attempts throughout 2020-2021 to maintain their practices, including the transition to online events. With the occasional easing of restrictions, community temporary spaces have played a key-role in keeping socio-cultural activities alive. An example is the Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik (ZK/U). With a focus on collaborative use, it can be seen as more sustainable alternative in times of crises.

Keywords: Berlin, COVID-19 pandemic; collaborative planning; temporary spaces, digital events.

Introduction

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has had a worldwide impact, affecting cities with varied social, economic, and cultural realities. In many of them, the cultural sector stood out as one of the most affected, since its spaces usually involve meetings, exchanges, and agglomerations. The 'social distancing' rule has become a challenge for conducting various practices, such as films screenings, theater plays, musical concerts, art exhibitions and clubbing. Consequently, cultural events and facilities were forced to reduce their capacity or even cease their activities for months on end during the years 2020 and 2021. Given this situation, this paper aims at looking at possible characteristics and solutions for cultural production and in the configuration of cultural spaces to mitigate the negative impacts of possible future pandemics, including the notion of temporality and collaboration.

This mitigation is necessary because, in addition to its social function, the cultural sector has played a vital role in cities' economies since the 1970s-1980s (Evans, 2001). After diverse worldwide deindustrialization processes, which generated abandoned and degraded places, many politicians and urban managers bet on the creation of carefully designed images to portrait their cities as cultural hubs and attractive tourist destinations (Bianchini & Parkinson, 1993). Over time, scholars and activists have controversially perceived this bet because it has generated more negative than positive consequences to cities, with gentrification

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usually standing out as result (Bernt et al., 2013). When it comes to urban and cultural strategic planning (Arantes et al., 2000) and trends in urban branding (Colomb, 2012a), which use art and culture as a tool to revitalize spaces, the city of Berlin is often cited as a paradigmatic example (Seldin, 2015). Scholars see it as a place that, since the fall of the Wall and German reunification, has been reinventing itself, seeking, firstly, the status of a spectacular 'cultural capital' and, more recently, of an innovative 'creative city' (Seldin, 2017).

In the Creative Berlin, temporary and improvised cultural spaces are presented as glorified markers of a desired authenticity, able to attract the by-now-much-dreaded-yet-profitable 'creative class' (Florida, 2002). Consequently, a brutal shutdown of its cultural sector can severely damage not only the arts, but also the local economy, affecting everyone from lower-income artists and cultural producers to those who actively engage in building the German's capital image and reputation within today's competitive global network.

From the last months of 2020 on, some specific trends were easy to spot in Berlin as attempts by the cultural sector to keep its activities going, including the transition to online events and the restricted operation of selected outdoor activities. While there has not yet been enough historical distance to assess the long-term consequences of the pandemic, it is necessary to investigate what kind of role these glorified temporary spaces play in keeping the Berliner cultural sector alive in times of crises.

Whereas many museums, art galleries, theaters and nightclubs had to close their doors, certain ephemeral practices could occasionally operate. While most outdoors bars, open-air cinemas and flea markets were still affected by social distancing rules and could only open on-and-off, some multifaceted community centers and gardens managed to bypass restrictions. One such case was the Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik (ZK/U) in the Northern district of Moabit. It became a place of refuge for neighbors who had stayed locked up for a long time and yearned for more sociability. This case study was approached through ethnography during the open house events that took place in 2020, where not only the center's coordinators were interviewed, but also visitors and participants in activities from the neighborhood. This consists in a preliminary study, which itself was affected by the social distancing rules still in place now of closing of this article. The research was complemented by data and facts gathered from local newspapers and web portals, which reported on the on-going situation during the first waves of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021.

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2. Creative City Berlin: Context

In the late twentieth century, cities gradually became showcases for spectacular cultural facilities endowed with star architecture (Sánchez, 2010), reflecting the transition from financial capital to cultural capital as a new driving force in the global economy. The controversial strengthening of the instrumentalization of culture in urban planning and public policy can be directly linked to a political and economic neoliberal context, in which the State retracts, moving from the position of planner and regulator to speculator and market facilitator. This has allowed urban space to be frequently determined by the interests of profit (Harvey, 2012).

In the past two decades, the so-called culturalization of urban space (Vaz, 2004) – so evident in the turn of the century, shifted to incorporate a 'new' concept: creativity. The notion of a 'creative class', disseminated by US economist Richard Florida (2002), gained ground, becoming increasingly popular with urban managers, policy makers and planning professionals worldwide. His controversial research proposed the rise of a new trend-setting group (mistakenly characterized as a 'class'), whose presence would be essential to the development of a successful contemporary city. This group would be characterized as young, bohemian, cool, diverse, and tolerant. It would also include very different professionals under one big umbrella: artists, scientists, entrepreneurs, IT workers, and political leaders, just to name a few. For Florida, these professionals are the producers of the creative and cognitive capital that move the twenty-first century global economy. This would be justified by the fact that we are now largely dependent on the development of high technology, research and the dissemination of information and communication (Krätke, 2011).

Despite the abundant criticism to his exclusionary theory, Florida's ideas were widely disseminated. Politicians, such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel and former Berlin Mayor Klaus Wowereit (mandate 2001-2014), began to directly mention him in their speeches while glorifying the so-called 'creative class'. They also began adopting measures to attract a much-selected type of new gentrifying residents to the country and its capital city (Seldin, 2020).

That is partially how, by the mid-2000s, Berlin managed to establish itself as a pioneer 'creative city,' also carrying UNESCO's seal of approval as a member of its Creative Cities Network under the speciality of design.

A big part of building Berlin's creative brand was the elation of its temporary spaces, especially the ones with a cool and subcultural character. These included politically charged cultural and residential squats, street art and improvised seedy spaces, often advertised in the city's official urban marketing campaigns and web portals (Seldin, 2020; 2017; 2015).

3. Temporary Urbanism and Artwashing

When it comes to temporary uses of space, Berlin is portrayed as a pioneer city. Often described as a 'laboratory for urban experiments' (Colomb, 2012a), it was there that the first publications written by architects and urban designers on the great potential of temporality for planning emerged (see Hayd & Temel, 2006; Urban Catalyst, 2007; Oswald, Overmeyer & Misselwitz, 2014). They highlighted temporary urbanism as a possibility for community participation in the city building process and, notably, its ability to attract the interest of the real estate market and renewal strategic urban areas. Ephemeral activities in empty and degraded sites were quickly advertised as unique. Also celebrated were festivals and cultural events with themes reminiscent of the diversity of the local population, such as the gay parade Love Parade, the multicultural fair Karneval der Kulturen (Carnival of Cultures), and other similar ones, which contribute to portray a cosmopolitan, metropolitan, and tolerant Berlin.

This pioneering role of Berlin in relation to temporary uses of space is, in many ways, a direct consequence of the abundant presence of urban voids and leftover spaces in the once divided city. Until the turn of the millennium, the German capital gathered a considerable number of former industrial sites, ranging from transport and urban services companies to demolished buildings. Their costs of revitalization were too high due to soil pollution, the absence of the necessary infrastructure, legislative bureaucracy, and restrictions of different kinds (Seldin 2017). In 2007, there was an estimated 500 hectares of empty and/or unused former industrial land alone (Urban Catalyst, 2007, p. 29). However, these urban voids did not result only from the processes of deindustrialization, but also from the very peculiar presence of the Berlin Wall. Cutting through the city, the Wall entailed in several extensive adjacent unbuilt spaces - the so-called 'death strips' or 'no man's lands' (see Figure 7.1.1).

At first, these spaces were deemed as obstacles to the reunified capital's urban renewal process due to their often-complicated property status. Most were set aside by both the State and their owners, who rented them out for very low prices or simply allowed their occupation with temporary (sometimes decades-long) contracts in exchange for protection against vandalism or degradation. These initial temporary users proved that, with little capital and a lot of willpower, they were able to revitalize the leftover sites spontaneously through their activities, indirectly remodeling their image and, thus, contributing to increase their real estate value.



► Figure 7.1.1. Sunday karaoke at the Mauerpark (wall park), a former no man's land
► Source: Claudia Seldin, 2007

A strong example of how cultural occupations were able to bring attention to certain degraded or destroyed areas of the city was the Kunsthaus Tacheles (Tacheles Art House – Figure 7.1.2), a former Jewish department store built in 1907 and occupied by international artists just three months after the fall of the Wall (Seldin, 2015). Between 1990 and the end of the 2000s, the site became a reference point for subculture, attracting

visitors from all over the world and appearing in tourist guides and the city's urban marketing portals (<https://www.berlin.de>).

In the publications hailing from Germany in the mid-2000s-2010s, short-term cultural uses were frequently described as 'miraculous solutions' or even best-practices to be incorporated into formal urban planning schemes as a means to solve diverse urban issues. This perception led to an encouragement of the practice of temporary use (or as it is known in German: *Zwischennutzung*) by local urban administrators, who even started to finance research on the subject. An example of that is the Urban Catalyst group (2007), who quickly began to emphasize the ability of this type of use to renew the degraded urban fabric in a cheap way (i.e., without State investments) and to attract tourists, going hand-in-hand with neoliberal ideals and recent trends in placemaking and city marketing. This contributed to temporary urbanism being turned into a new planning strategy – one that rekindled interest in forgotten or degraded regions.

The glorification of temporary urbanism as an efficient instrument for real estate speculation led, in the 2010s, to intensive gentrification processes and the direct or indirect eviction of many cultural and residential occupations, whose contracts had been established during the 1980-1990s. In recent years, a great number of temporary users once featured in Berlin promotional brochures have been expelled by new owners – mostly financial institutions and property developers interested in turning the land into luxury apartment complexes or creative business clusters. The Kunsthaus Tacheles itself underwent eviction processes between 2012 and 2013 (Seldin, 2017; 2015), remaining empty for years. Only in 2019, construction began at its site to ensure its conversion into a mix of residential buildings (with star architecture signed by the Swiss duo Herzog & de Meuron) paired with a photographic museum of the chain Fotografiska (with branches in Stockholm, New York and Tallinn).



► Figure 7.1.2. Cultural squat in the backyard of the Kunsthaus Tacheles in protest of the main building's eviction months before
► Source: Claudia Seldin, 2013

Amidst this recent instrumentalization of temporality, many artists and social movement collectives began to look down on some strategic and pre-planned short-term interventions carried out by developers with second

intentions. In 2020, the Berliner art collective Kunstblock & Beyond expressed via interviews for this research their outrage at recent 'artwashing' practices in the city. Artwashing happens when real estate developers invite artists to hold short-term exhibitions or events in empty buildings to draw attention to them and increase their sale value, attracting a greater number of potential buyers while branding their company as 'art-friendly.' In a way, the practice of artwashing reflects a process of programmed gentrification, in which the artist is, from the beginning, used as a pawn to fulfill existing speculative interests, not always being paid for their work.

An example of current artwashing in Berlin is the initiative 'The Shelf' by the developer group Pandion. In order to increase interest in one of their projects, they invited artists to use, for months between 2018 and 2019, an empty warehouse complex, previously occupied by a car rental company in the district of Kreuzberg. As a sign of retaliation against their actions, the Kunstblock & Beyond collective began to carry out tactical protests them in an attempt to raise awareness, especially among other artists.

Given these recent negative tendencies of using temporary urbanism for strategic purposes, we must question whether short-term and ephemeral cultural uses can still have beneficial consequences for cities. This on-going research in Berlin hypothesizes that they can indeed result in benefits to local communities if they are thought out in a horizontal and collaborative manner. In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic has only reinforced the need for adaptive, multifaceted, solidary, and transparent spaces.

4. The Berliner Cultural Sector during the COVID-19 Pandemic: alternatives

The COVID-19 pandemic, which devastated the cultural industry globally between 2020 and 2021, brought the possibility of reinventing temporary cultural activities not necessarily embedded in broader strategies of revitalization, placemaking and real estate speculation.²

Concerning Berlin's cultural sector, so far, three main trends have been observed: 1) solidarity and fundraising campaigns for gastronomy, artists, cultural/ entertainment spaces; 2) the online streaming of (paid or free) cultural events; and 3) the encouragement of outdoor activities or in semi-open

spaces in moments when the number of Corona cases is low.

The first two points refer to new technologies and digital platforms that enable communication, the exchange of information and the establishment of solidarity and sociability networks in the city without personal contact. An example of a solidarity campaign was the one entitled 'Helfen.Berlin' (<https://helfen-shop.berlin/>, loosely translated 'helping Berlin'), developed by marketing designer Karsten Kossatz (Ollivier, 2020b). The non-profit online platform allows residents to purchase advanced vouchers for multiple activities and businesses, ranging from restaurants to beauty salons and nightclubs. Within the scope of the campaign, these businesses are deemed a 'Lieblingsort' (favorite place), which designates an affectionate relationship between the customer and the small business on the scale of the neighborhood. Its concept is simple: small ventures can register for free to the online platform and are sorted by district. The customer can then choose a voucher with a predetermined value or type in the amount they would like to spend. The transaction implies an advance commitment to execute a service or provide a product. For example, the client anticipates 25 euros from the price of a theater ticket and has the guarantee that they will be able to use the voucher once the venue reopens, regardless of the season. In addition to the online platform, businesses can also place posters on their shop windows or facades indicating that they are part of the campaign as a 'Lieblingsort.' The posters (Figure 7.1.3) feature a QR code that passersby can contactless scan with their mobile phones, directing them immediately to the platform. Until December 2020, Helfen.Berlin announced the collection of more than 1.5 million euros.



► Figure 7.1.3 - Campaign poster for Helfen.Berlin in the district of Friedrichshain: "I am a Lieblingsort."
 ► Source: Claudia Seldin, 2020

2. I emphasize that this paper was written during the pandemic (between 2020 and 2021) and, as of its publication, not enough time has passed for a proper analysis of the long-term effects of the events here discussed.

It is noteworthy that, in Berlin, the State played an essential role during the pandemic, providing subsidies for a considerable number of professionals, who were not simply left at the mercy of donations made through solidarity campaigns. With reports of financial losses by artists of up to 75% (DW, 2020a) in March and April of 2020, the municipality announced several *Soforthilfe* (immediate help) benefits for autonomous workers and small businesses in the cultural, creative and event sectors between 2020 and 2021. Despite some complaints about the delay of the benefits, excessive bureaucracy and a selective vein, the values could exceed 5,000 euros per aid³. These subsidies continued to be granted, even with indications of a 10.1% drop in the German economy before the middle of 2020 (DW, 2020b) – the largest since the post-war period. This attests the relative strength of the German well-fare system and the privileges of countries in the center of global capitalism, often taken for granted by its citizens. In nations like Brazil, the subsidies during the pandemic in 2020 were as low as 600 euros divided in five monthly quotas and available only to unemployed citizens, who are not already receiving any social benefits, with several complaints issued to denounce problems and corruption in the payments (Mota, 2021).

The second trend observed in the cultural sector cities around the world, was the holding of online events. One of the major concerns raised by the Berliner cultural sector during the pandemic was the need to support its *Klubkultur* (club culture), so essential to its creative brand. As stated by Bader and Scharenberg (2013), Berlin's urban managers have worked for years on the connection between the image of the city and electronic music. Since the late 1990s, Berlin has been considered by many as a reference for techno music and for exclusive and world-renowned nightclubs and fetish clubs, among them the Berghain and the KitKat Club. Closing such places for months would bring irreparable damage, not only to the cultural producers directly involved, but also to the club sector itself, which has weakened in recent years.

With this in mind, digital communication agent Armin Berger created another online platform called "Berlin (a)live"⁴, this time dedicated to hosting paid online events. The project was supported and encouraged by the city's Department for Culture and Europe (Senatsverwaltung für Kultur und Europa).

Berger's agency had only five days to create the interface, following the example of a series of other events, which were beginning to go digital, such as classes and conferences. As of June 2020, Berlin (a)live was already offering more than 500 streaming events, including from major cultural institutions, such as the Schaubühne (theatre) and the Deutsche Oper (opera). The schedule also featured smaller recurring events, including ballet lessons and storytelling (Ollivier, 2020b).

Still, the Berlin (a)live project was not the only one created in the German capital with a focus on *Klubkultur* during the pandemic. Another similar initiative emerged under the title 'United We Stream'⁵, mainly organized by nightclubs and musical performers. The project streamed live parties with famous DJs of the local scene, playing from their homes or places with social distancing rules. The shows were broadcast through an official website, working as a fundraising platform to support this particular sector. In 2020 alone, they streamed 73 live events, raising around €570,000 for 67 Berlin nightclubs and another €45,000 for a charity benefiting refugees migrating across the open sea. By the end of the year, 2068 artists had participated in the project, filming their events from 425 spaces in 92 cities around the world. As such, the initiative ended up crossing German barriers, using the potential of the internet to support other artists and nightclubs from different cities.

The success of virtual events as an occasional replacement for interaction, work, culture and academic activities makes it clear that our traditional view of 'spaces' is transforming to increasingly incorporate the 'digital' into our daily lives, whether we want it or not. The pandemic has certainly accelerated this transformation and made the inequalities of access to technology between inhabitants and among different places in the world more evident. Still, no matter the number of virtual events, human beings have the basic need to develop in-person contacts and to experience culture as a sociable exchange.

4.1. Adapt to Survive: Flexible and Multiple Spaces

In addition to the phenomenon of digitalization of cultural events, the pandemic also brought about a provisional shift in the function of certain spaces.

3. Available at: <https://www.berlin.de/sen/kulteu/aktuelles/>

4. Available at: <https://www.berlinalive.de/>

5. Available at: <https://en.unitedwestream.berlin/>

These were places, which suffered, not only from the new rules restricting social contact, but also from the implement of a limit of public capacity per square footage and sporadic bans on the consumption of alcohol. These measures substantially harmed their profits and ability to pay their employees. In light of that, several gastronomy, art and entertainment spaces in Berlin turned into temporary hospitals, testing or vaccination centers, partially as an attempt to keep them receiving some income while closed for their original activities. This was the case with the fetish nightclub KitKat Club, which functioned as testing center (The Local, 2020) from 2020 to 2021, and the Messehalle Berlin fair and exhibition pavilion, which become a field hospital for patients infected exclusively with COVID-19 (Haak, 2020). Additionally, the Berlin state opera staff was reported to use their venue to sew protective masks for the population instead of costumes (Pottamkulam, 2020).

Another interesting phenomenon was the adaptation of certain entertainment spaces into other cultural modalities that entail in smaller crowds and the possibility of social distance. This is what happened to the famous and exclusive Berghain nightclub, partially turned into a temporary art gallery (Carter, 2020). The success of the gallery was such, that the Berghain kept it open in 2021, and is likely to maintain the space (an adjacent house to the main club under the name LAS). With the easing of restrictions in summer of 2021, LAS successfully hosted the high-tech exhibition 'Berl-Berl' by artist Jakob Kudsk Steensen, setting the ground for future similar events.

Despite the surprising response of the public to digital cultural activities, the many platforms created did not replace the need for face-to-face exchanges and the experiment of culture in person. That is why, during the summer months of 2020 and 2021, when the number of COVID-19 cases were down, Berliners were encouraged to frequent open areas to carry out cultural activities.

This encouragement was not limited to the traditional Biergärten, Strandbars, Freiluftkinos, and Flöhmärkte. It also happened through alternative projects such as the Draussenstadt (outdoor city) program⁶. Also sponsored by the Department for Culture and Europe, the program aims to connect different cultural actors in the city, allowing for dialogue between artists, researchers, and activists. They can formally apply to receive funding to carry out artistic intervention's outdoor spaces. The program also encourages think tank meetings, open-air clubbing, and neighborhood activities.

³²⁶ Of course, one must consider that many of these outdoor activities depend on good weather conditions. This means that, in colder months, such events are made difficult, imposing obstacles to the program. For this reason, in November 2020, the Department began collecting ideas for interventions capable of overcoming climate barriers. By early December 2020, many restaurants and events started using mushroom-shaped outdoor heaters to continue operating (Bath, 2020), before being completely shut down due to the pandemic's third wave. These heaters were controversial due to their low sustainability and negative environmental impact.

The Draussenstadt program, still in its initial phase of application, has focused on activities in more consolidated and central cultural spaces, such as the Berlinische Galerie and the Kulturforum, which are not easily accessible for residents of more distant neighborhoods and who do not feel comfortable to use public transport. For this reason, another type of space has stood out as an important point of reference for sociability and culture in the German capital: community centers, especially those partially opened and created from collaborative planning schemes between residents, artists, and planning professionals. One of them is the Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik (ZK/U).

5. Case Study: The ZK/U – Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik

The Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik (Center for Art and Urbanity – Figure 7.1.4), located in the Northern district of Moabit, occupies the land of a former railway warehouse. In the early 2010s, the area was the object of a participatory planning process guided by the representatives of the broader district of Mitte. As a result, a variety of stakeholders became responsible for different parts of the site, which included one building and a large yard.

The outdoor area was turned into a public park of 15,000m², including playgrounds, a large lawn, and a communal garden. All of them are open to the local neighborhood. Managed by the non-profit association BürSte e.V., the garden contains communal vegetable plots and orchards.

6. Available at: <http://www.kulturprojekte.berlin/draussenstadt>

The building was renovated in 2012 under the management of the KUNSTrePUBLIK collective, which includes architects and artists. The hybrid multiuse space functions as a cultural center for art exhibitions, urban festivals, research, and even conferences. The former warehouse is divided between office spaces, exhibition areas (a basement and a large hall) and a back area with temporary housing units for foreign artists accepted into their residency program. The back of the building includes a semi-opened terrace with an independent bar. The ZK/U's agenda also includes activities aimed at integration with the neighborhood, such as open houses, football viewing parties, film screenings and food markets. At the space designed by the KUNSTrePUBLIK, the community has the freedom to carry out sports and leisure activities in the open and semi-open areas.



► Figure 7.1.4. The Z/KU in Moabit
► Source: Claudia Seldin, 2020

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During the pandemic, the different actors involved in the center's organization remained connected, creating bridges that allowed for dialogue regarding the use of the site. In 2020, following the restrictions imposed by the municipality, they held events such as the Open Haus (open house - Figure 7.1.5). During these, local groups, resident artists and small food producers shared the lawn and terrace to play, have fun and share their initiatives, personal and collective projects with the public, developing a exchange of ideas with visitors (mostly from the neighborhood, but also from other parts of Berlin).

During a field visit to an Open Haus in August 2020, it was possible to interview individuals and groups spread out on the lawn, trying to conduct or advertise different activities. The event gathered: a gym for female self-defense and martial arts, a bocce competition, mediators of social organizations in charge of youth programs, food producers, resident artists, and guest musicians, among others. Most of the interviewees highlighted the importance of the location for Moabit due to its openness, adaptability, and the presence of a large green area – something unusual in the district.

Social worker Nadine⁷ stressed the importance of the space to establish a dialogue with the local youth. She explains that giving their own space to take care of makes them feel responsible for it, preventing certain vandalizing acts that took place in the past against the warehouse. ZK/U's project coordinator Miodrag Kuč emphasized that the space "has a natural ecosystem, which facilitates the meeting of different people." He believes that the neighbors' interest in the center and its possibility to continue operating, despite the restrictions imposed on other cultural spaces, refers to the multiplicity and resilience of the ZK/U. According to him, this "resilience is directly linked to the flexibility of the location." However, the idea of 'flexibility' is not just physical. It is embedded in the ZK/U's ideology. For Kuč, this results not only from the spatial characteristics of the site, which mixes extensive outdoor areas with semi-covered ones, but also from their proposal to maintain an open organizational structure, in which all the actors involved have the power of speech. Unlike

7. Her last name is suppressed for the sake of anonymity.

other traditional cultural centers, the constant dialogue and flexibility of the different actors involved in its decision-making processes, allow for creative solutions in difficult moments. Because they can think 'outside the box' and be more adaptable, places like the ZK/U could have an easier time operating in crisis mode than museums, cinemas, theaters, among others, pointing to a need to rethink our models of cultural facilities in contemporary cities.



► Figure 7.1.5. Open house at the ZK/U during the pandemic: each distant group, identified by a sign, corresponds to a neighborhood initiative exhibiting and publicizing their work
► Source: Claudia Seldin, 2020

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6. Final Considerations

This paper presented the first observations concerning alternative solutions developed by the Berlin cultural sector to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021. Naturally, not all cultural producers in this city were able to carry on with their activities. The examples mentioned here simply point to a few successfully executed ideas and actions, able to take place due to the existence of resources, State support and pre-established contact networks that allowed for acts of solidarity. It is also important to highlight that, during the year 2020, some members of Berlin's event sector held protests against the virus prevention measures, demonstrating against the use of masks and the reduction/ban of their activities, joining forces with right-wing voices. For instance, protests with the slogan #OnFire took place in September of 2020, featuring hundreds of vehicles that crossed the city demanding more specific aid programs to help private companies financially (RBB24, 2020). What this shows us is that, despite the possibilities of reinventing some cultural activities and spaces, especially about the use of new technologies and digital platforms, the challenges faced by the cultural sector remain, especially when the sector is so strongly tied with market forces.

What the Berlin experience also shows us is that there are limits to the impact of virtual activities and, even, to more horizontally organized spaces. Culture means more than art, leisure, and entertainment. Culture is a basic human right connected to the exchange of experiences, the realization of sociability, and the possibilities of encounters with others. It plays a huge role in our emotional and psychological well-being, something largely affected during the pandemic. Because of its enormous value, we need to think of culture as more than just a past time or a business and invest in a true reformulation of the public policies around it.

In terms of urban planning and tendencies, examples, such as the ZK/U, point to the need to think about culture in urban space with greater flexibility, escaping from fixed standards and considering actions at a smaller scale, focused on dialogue and on the real demand of local communities in a decentralized way. This does not mean replicating decontextualized formulas of so-called 'tactical urbanism', so easily glorified as best practices today (see Seldin et al., 2020). It means moving away from pre-defined formulas and understanding the need of each community, each neighborhood in a situated manner; moving from the spectacle and the large business model to provide for the artists per se.

As a point of conclusion, it is necessary to highlight that, in regard to the COVID-19 pandemic, only when we have enough historical distance to understand the extent of its effects, will it be possible to have a true analysis of the necessary changes to cultural facilities in the cities of the future. Still, what this very peculiar moment is telling us is that, perhaps, it is time to focus not only on the economy of culture, but also on its impacts on the evolution of human relationships.

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