02

SPREEFELD CO-HOUSING – BERLIN

An Island of Common Good Thinking

Introduction

Berlin has had a reputation for radical co-housing projects, and this large cooperative project is one of the most interesting. Spreefeld is a residential and mixed-use cooperative development, consisting of community spaces, mixed residential units, and office and workshop spaces as well as a daycare and extensive gardens. The cooperative idea is not a new one: Robert Owen and his plans for New Lanark¹ aimed to give people a better life. Spreefeld draws on these core values of the cooperative and places it firmly in the future with a commitment to promoting inclusion, diversity, ecology and a wide mixed-use ethos. The project was conceived in 2007 and construction was pretty much complete by 2014. The site is 4,000 m² in area and the final project has 64 flats in three main blocks with other community facilities. However, it is an ongoing project, which, by its cooperative nature, will never be finished, demanding constant and continuing collaboration and the ability to work with many different disciplines and agendas, creating a different mode of thinking.

FIGURE III.2.1 View from the roof looking over towards the Spree. Photo by Prue Chiles.

In Berlin over the last 30 years, there have been many similar projects made possible by the economic and social conditions specific to this city. It is almost impossible to think this could be built today, on this prominent riverbank site on the Spree in Mitte. Land in East Berlin is now highly sought after, well connected and subject to overseas commercial development. However, in the first decade of the 21st century, this kind of project was possible. It was part of the no-man's land next to the militarised border. After the Berlin Wall was opened, these riverbanks first attracted squatters and music clubs.

This was a self-organised project without any external funding, and with a huge amount of engagement from all involved parties, the land was bought from the federal government by the cooperative. It is a project that could be seen as the antithesis of the capitalist development of the contemporary urban landscape in Berlin, as it insists solely on different groups of people having a desire for the common good.

Who Is Involved

The players, participants, clients and their priorities and aspirations, and the trans/interdisciplinary nature of the project due to this. Who are the stakeholders and participants in this project and what are their roles? Who is leading the project and why? Are you consciously working as an interdisciplinary team, understanding that people have different priorities? How have you overcome conflicting viewpoints and priorities of different groups? How are you enabling the team to work together?

We revisited the project in September 2019, after staying and working there for a few days in 2017, to talk to Michael LaFond, one of the key founding members and activists developing Spreefeld. Taking an interdisciplinary approach to urban planning, Michael works and lives in Spreefeld, running id22 – the institute for creative sustainability that is based at Spreefeld, using it as a test bed for sustainable urban community development. The group works especially with future perspectives for civil society-initiated projects that are dealing with housing for the common good.²

The project is as much about social architecture and orchestration as it is about the fabric of the buildings. Three architecture firms³ collaborated with the clients, the cooperative and residents on the project. There was a shared agenda that the project would be socially sustainable and ecologically driven. It seems that this project did, and will always, rely on a core set of values and principles between all parties to create a real sense of collective endeavour and respect. The co-housing principles are expressed in the range of common spaces and in activities such as gardening.

From the very beginning, the cooperative structure has been critical to its success – from planning, construction and the project's initial management. The whole story of Spreefeld is about how people are able to work together, compromise and discuss – the self-organised structure allows for this. In Berlin, co-housing initiatives have become mainstream over the last 30 years; because of this, people are much more educated and less apprehensive about such initiatives, and they are in very high demand, and so finding a group of residents, collaborators and core members was not difficult.

The group is diverse and multi-cultural, and about 85 residents are members of the cooperative. The members are invited to the monthly meetings: about half of them attend. Then, twice a year, the general assembly meeting means that 95% of the people are represented. It has been essential for this group to communicate effectively and moderate any conflict in a constructive way. This allows for decisions to be made and issues to be resolved in the interest of the whole community.

FIGURE III.2.2 The communal workshop. Photo by Prue Chiles.

FIGURE III.2.3 Fire map showing all the blocks of the complex. Photo by Prue Chiles.

A Narrative Description of the Project and the Outcomes

Prioritising the stages and scope of the project, mentioning how the trans/interdisciplinary nature of the project enabled or created barriers to the progress of the project. What were the most important stages of the project? Was there a stage in the project in which an interdisciplinary team was really important? Was there a part of the project where an interdisciplinary team made it difficult to progress?

Twelve years after its conception and five years since construction was finished, the project is still an ongoing test bed for collaboration in a community setting. It is a beautifully conceived project, well detailed with a mature landscape and three well-functioning community hubs, the workshop, the dance and venue space, and the community kitchen. It has also developed collective productive gardens and terraces and a beach-like river frontage with pond and central power building, guest rooms and two apartments made available to refugees. A boathouse which was used by the East Berlin water police is now used for parties.

This is testament to the huge team of people, the architects, the cooperative, the businesses, the residents and the neighbouring communities. The project has still not settled down; it is a process of orientation and flexibility. The project has to allow things to evolve. It is seen as a lifelong project with long-term adaptability for the greater good. One of the residents, Claudia, who is one the Spreeacker board of directors – says:

“Acting convivially calls for a deeper consciousness as to what implementation can look like. As part of this transformation, the Spreeacker can make its contribution together with a range of self-organised projects.”

Before the Spreefeld cooperative started to build, the Spreeacker (SpreeAcres) was initiated to activate the land around the construction site. The local population was also invited to engage with the site and develop a variety of garden, cultural and educational projects. Michael cites five to 15 people as the ideal size of the core working group in order to ensure productivity while creating a space for a range of views.

The housing consists of a wide range of different types of units, including private residential flats and communal clusters which allow people private and communal living space. This combination recognises that people do live differently and want different things from a co-housing project. As life circumstances change and households both shrink and grow, there is space for those needs to be addressed: people are able to move to different units within Spreefeld. Although balancing the cyclical needs of residents is an ongoing challenge and will never be simple, the scale of the housing allows for this movement and is key to its social sustainability. One of its key successes is also its biggest challenge, the need for lifelong flexibility and diversity in scale that it offers.

Some of the residents are in the process of buying their units. This provides them with a perceived level of security, and the ability to do this is seen by many as a realistic response to the external pressures that people face in a complex time of economic uncertainty.

The office spaces, community space, nursery and workshop spaces create relationships outside the cooperative group. These connections have become crucial in sustaining and developing the project. The commercial users pay rent to the cooperative – this helps financially of course, but also socially; the cooperative seeks to be outward-looking and integrated to benefit the wider community. The wood workshop, for example, which was well used during the early stages of the project by residents, now demands a wider group of users and external management. This allows residents to still have access to the facilities while the internal demand is unable to sustain the workshop alone. The needs

FIGURE III.2.4 Roof terrace at Spreefeld. Photo by Prue Chiles.

of the community have changed and structures have had to adapt to ensure the project remains sustainable.

The community and commercial spaces are not subsidised by the cooperative, ensuring they are an asset rather than a burden to the residents.

Conclusions and Final Comments

What the project achieved, successes and failures of the project and its potential wider significance.

What were the main challenges you faced? Was working in an interdisciplinary team crucial to the outcome?

Were there any surprises in the project? What is the most significant/successful outcome?

Berlin, like London, is on its way to being a city where investment and buying property, from overseas investors especially, is driving the city's development. The political system only allows for the building of apartments purely for investment. Berlin is also now a city "with no vacancies." The Spreefeld project could not happen in this way now and not on this site. It was born from a radical do-it-yourself time, and when we look at the context today, people are in much more need but the possibilities for operating differently are fewer.

The cooperative now invites the public in more and more, to support and sustain the Spreefeld community, making more connections with the city and the river front. They collaborate with a number of neighbours, the Holzmarkt Cultural Centre, the German Architectural Centre and the Teepee Land next door – an informal settlement and early coloniser of the space.

The sustainability of this scheme demands more networking to develop connections at a civic level and address the global pressures our cities and neighbourhoods are facing. This project did not need any higher governance; now the cities are more out of control, there is a greater need for people to put an emphasis on the common good and cooperation. The mutually beneficial relationships that have been created with examples at Spreefeld must now be recognised within a larger power structure in order to be a viable alternative to conventional housing developments.

Schemes like Spreefeld are “schools for urban democracy” where people are able to learn how to participate and understand how a better life can be achieved together. It relies on core collaboration from many different parties, from central government to new immigrant neighbours. It does not rely on competition between different groups, but recognises when external political and economic pressures must be understood and responded to. This democracy happens at many levels, and it is the negotiating skills and joint thinking coming from different directions that allow for mutual thinking. Spreefeld have a clear agenda: they have learned through experience how to communicate and negotiate well and have developed social skills necessary in different situations.

“This kind of urban mix is best developed and managed by a cooperative. It is democratic and stable for the long term. We want to remain agile and open.... it has to do with quality of housing and of life.”

Christian and Angelika – residents and facilitators

Notes

- 1 Robert Owen, social philosopher and leader of early British socialism. He was also, at least until 1827, a practical man of business, closely involved in the direction of some of the largest and most advanced industrial undertakings of his time.
- 2 The project is written about by Michael in “Spreefeld, Berlin: Cohousing, CoWorking and CoGardening” in ID22: Institute for Creative Sustainability, Co-housing inclusive: Self-organised, community-led housing for all, 2017.
- 3 Carpaneto Architekten, Fatkoehl Architekten and BARarchitekten.

References

- ID22: Institute for Creative Sustainability. (2017). Co-housing inclusive: Self-organised, community-led housing for all. Berlin: Jovis Verlag.