Berlin: hyper-gentrification proved just how quickly conflict-torn cities can change

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Modern day Kreuzberg is one of Berlin's most trendy and multicultural neighbourhoods. Its central location, dynamic mix of cafes, shops and nightlife, alongside residential streets and lucrative river views fuse to create a vibrant urban lifestyle. Kreuzberg encapsulates many of the remarkable elements that make Berlin not only one of the most attractive German cities to live in today, but also a leading tourist destination and a place to settle for the international cosmopolitan elite.

Over the last few decades, inward migration to Berlin has grown rapidly, with many foreign born citizens choosing to settle in the reunified heart of the re-established capital city. From 2012 to 2017, the city grew by 243,500

people – 81% of which were foreigners. The previously peripheral and impoverished neighbourhood of Kreuzberg has, for some years, been undergoing a process of hyper-gentrification an excessive process of population change where the old usually less affluent residents are squeezed out of an area undergoing a rapid gentrification process becoming trendy and attractive to other persons from an upper-class group who move to the neighbourhood of a lower-class group, usually tied with ethnicity, race and class (https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9780203975640). It's now in high demand among global property investors and locals alike, transforming the urban fabric and leading to a hike in property prices (https://www.citylab.com/equity/2018/01/friedrichshain-kreuzberg-apartments-rent-prices/549314/).

Hyper-gentrification especially in conflict-torn cities such as Berlin comes with a mixed blessing. We need a certain degree of intersectionality to view the positive and negative impact on local residents. The complexities that it brings is regarded by the ousted residents as a violent cleansing of a stimulating everyday neighbourhood life lost to the predatory practices of the real estate entrepreneurs. Berlin is an extreme example of a rapid shift to a new political and economic status quo asserting itself in similar neo-liberal capitalist patterns across the world of cities (https://www.versobooks.com/books/3007-rebel-cities).

The divided city

It's almost impossible to imagine that only 30 years ago, Kreuzberg was at the front line of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States. Located on the Western side of the Iron Curtains demilitarised border zone, the neighbourhood was a rundown frontier precinct. Sniper fire from the East Berlin border guards was a daily reality, and they would floodlight the area at night, searching for defectors from the Eastern communist bloc.

The poorly maintained housing and cheap rent attracted large numbers of migrant workers – predominantly from Turkey – who settled in Kreuzberg from the early 1970s (https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/turkish-berlin) and still make up a significant part of the neighbourhood's large and diverse immigrant population (https://www.abebooks.co.uk/Ghetto-Ideologies-Youth-Identities-Stylized-Turkish/16775551901/bd). This heritage survives today in the form of some local shops, and a famous Turkish food market near the Landwehr Canal.

The border within Berlin was first imposed by the Potsdam Agreement in August 1945 (https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/potsdam-conference), but it wasn't until August 1961 that the Soviet Union installed

the wall over the course of just two weeks (https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/on-the-front-lines-of-the-cold-war-documents-on-the-intelligence-war-in-berlin-1946-to-1961/art-9.html) – nominally to prevent "facists" from entering the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), but also to stem the flood of outward migration with 2.7 million East Germans moved to the west until the wall was sealed. (https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/on-the-front-lines-of-the-cold-war-documents-on-the-intelligence-war-in-berlin-1946-to-1961/art-9.html#rft10)

The wall stood for 10,316 days, with military fortifications dividing and tightly sealing the streets and public spaces that once formed the city's civic centre. The Iron Curtain came down three decades ago but the construction of new border walls is growing rapidly in the 21st century. (https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2013/nov/walls#intro) The impact of borders on urban populations becomes especially significant in obstructing daily life of those living in neighbourhoods near to the fault-lines as the history of Berlin discloses.

Making history

When citizens started tearing down the Berlin wall on November 9, 1989, it marked the return of the original urban core – people flooded across to see the other side of their own city, for the first time in more than 28 years. The powerful symbolism of this moment cannot be overstated – but the process of healing that came afterwards was arguably just as significant.

Both sides of the city benefited from community groups coming together – with strong support from the federal government – to regenerate Berlin's heart where the wall once stood (https://senacatal.wordpress.com/2016/10/14/case-study-urban-regeneration-kreuzberg-berlin). The rebuilding and renewal of the nation's capital came to represent peace and healing. But that was not the end of the changes.

The lessons from Berlin's urban transformation hold valuable insights and can foster optimism for other cities divided by national conflicts. What remains certain is that Berlin has become a global posterchild of peace and optimism and holds the symbolic vision of what may happen one day in other conflict-torn contested cities. Bringing down the Iron Curtain overnight and ending decades of bitter rivalry, which were just days earlier seen as rock-solid fact on the ground, holds the hope that with the right political momentum similar rapid process can happen elsewhere.

These observations hold telling facts about the potential development of other opportunities in cities suffering from regional and global conflicts. With this background in mind it is worth examining and re-thinking ethno-national contested cities such as; Baghdad, Beirut, Jerusalem, Mostar, Nicosia, Kirkuk and Sarajevo, to mention but a few of the most prolific and widely known cases. Under the current political circumstances, there is little hope to see a major shift to complete reconciliation in any of the aforementioned cities (https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9780203156209).

Even so, the lack of comprehensive peace does not necessarily mean that all hope for a profound political solution is lost. The case of Kreuzberg and its pivotal shift from the frontline of the Cold War to the centre piece of the united and vibrant urban core holds much potential and hope for other cities in conflict. In this sense, the experience from Berlin demonstrates that urban planning and policy should be viewed as distinct and essential instruments in reaching better cooperation and not wait for national or international overarching political solutions (http://bcrfj.revues.org/6895). Finding viable alternative futures in cities located on national and international fault-lines remains critical in our global struggle to stabilise the current unfolding global social and environmental crises.