

01

I am here
Inside
Just finished my coffee. There's no trash bin here...

Wait... I'll have a look online.
Well, there seems to be one on Hertastraße. It's orange.

Indeed, I can see it.
Uuh, it starts to rain.
Someone built a shelter here underneath this tree...

Under the bushes towards Bendastraße?
Is that homeless person still there?

No, I passed by often during the last weeks. The camp seems to be abandoned. But I'm not sure...
There is still a mattress and a sleeping bag, and a part of a sofa to block sight, but it all got pretty wet now.
Hey, who do you think removed the planks from these benches?

Is Berlin cleaning the city from the homeless and refugees?

Whom do you mean saying "Berlin"?

The SPD mayor Giffey and her city council.

I don't know... Could be. But it could also be the neighbors that have removed the planks, to keep homeless people away...

Or maybe they were just old, rotten and broken. A result of years of budget cuts and lack of maintenance.

True...
Although the city still seems to maintain the greenery here.
Or at least someone does.
Someone cares about this place.

Yes, it looks like it.
But it is not looking that nice, like with flowers and so.

No, apparently there's no money for that. Just basic maintenance of the bushes. But that also means that the shelter was not removed. No urban gardening yet either...
The benches without seats look very sad and cynical in a way...
You know what: I'm gonna repair both of them!

Look at Silbersteinstraße: There's heavy traffic and a railing to protect pedestrians. Silbersteinstraße is the street with the highest air pollution measured in Berlin.

I know! This place is like an island with sidewalk beaches, surrounded by traffic. Still this island seems to be a home to someone. To someone cast away...

Eduard Müller island!

Sounds very colonialist...

He was more of a nice guy. On Wikipedia I read he was a priest and a missionary vicar in 19th century Berlin who promoted the foundation of Catholic communities.

Uh, I wonder whether he has any dark spots in his biography...

I don't think so...
he was called a half-saint.
He took care of the poor, the workers and migrants and opened his house for them!
Well, the square was named after him in 1984. Now it seems to connect with its history.

It seems the whole square is designed around these 2 corners with the benches.
A square for four people to be seated, relax and discuss. Now this central function is gone since the benches are missing their seats.

But apparently this square's main function now is to give shelter to homeless people.

The rain is getting heavier - but let's stay here a little longer, OK?

Yes!
Do you see the bridge behind you?

Hertabrücke!

Yes!

What about it?

It reminds me of the movie "Der Himmel über Berlin" by Wim Wenders.
The scene where a motorist dies in a crash and one of the angels listens to his last words.
We watched it when we came to live in Berlin in 2005.
Remember?
Then we found it incredibly silly, slow, and so 80-ies kitsch. We hated it.
I recently watched it again. Now I thought it was beautiful.

Due to the building boom there's less and less Himmel to be seen in... wow, talking about sky: did you hear the thunder?
What did you like about the film now?

For me the dichotomy between East and West Berlin is less and less important.
This is Cold War fetishism for tourists.
And this film has really become a beautiful time document of pre 1989. By now the wound has healed and Berlin is whole again.

Hmm, this is something to be argued about... I think the new dividing line is a social one. Between rich and poor. Gentrification ravages through the city, neighbourhoods change and people are pushed away. If you cannot pay the rent in Neukölln anymore, you have to move to the outskirts - regardless if East or West. They are building "SIL/BER Workspace" a co-working start-up-hipster-hub down the street and a little further they are planning the "Neue Ringbahnhöfe" with a 100m high tower. This will make rents increase over here massively!

But what can we do about gentrification? Don't we have a part in it?

We should be more aware about the changes in our environments. And true - us sitting here or making an exhibition here, hanging out, drinking beer can be gentrifying as well.

People do go to the streets and protest against higher rents and investors buying property.
Do you know the film "Push"?
We met Leilani Farha a couple of months ago at the European Parliament in Brussels.
She is fighting for the right to an adequate standard of living and housing as a human right!

If we keep the conversation to this square: I think it's important to look at these forgotten places before they change. Who will stand up for this square if its existence will be threatened. If the homeless people are driven out and the shrubs and trees wither. If this square would be larger and not so cut off by traffic, change would already have taken place.

If housing was a human right, there would not be homeless people living on Eduard-Müller-Platz.

02

The homeless camp is gone.
Someone cleaned it all up. Everything gone!

Can you see the stone wall encircling the greenery?

Yes.

Look at this stone down there. It seems to have some engravings on it...
And this one shows remains of mortar.
That one on the corner seems to be built in facing inwards.

Maybe it was part of a facade ornament.

Are these walls made out of rubble from World War II?

I think so.

Look: many different types of natural stone. But all the size of large bricks.

Hmmm... interesting,
Maybe it's all from one house that was standing here before?

The house of Eduard Müller!

We could do a lot of elaborate research here. About flora and fauna, about the construction and design of the square, about the people that lived or live here...

But we can also just sit here on this bench and try to read the environment and create our own view onto it.

Let's do that.

I think it's interesting, that speculation can go both ways. We can speculate about the past of the square, but also about its future.

Right.
And the square is the hinge...
We are in Neukölln, right?

Yes.

"Neuköln" is one of the three ambient pieces written by David Bowie and Brian Eno in 1977 for "Heroes". It depicts isolation, the atmosphere of Berlin of that time – bohemian but unpretentious, worn out, but glamorous. Qualities the city still has today: "Arm aber Sexy".

Bowie sat exactly on this bench, getting inspiration for that track!

But still he misspelled the name.
Neukölln with just one L and...

Wait - there's someone sitting in the other corner...

Where?

There right behind me!

So people do use this square!

Wait - I'll go and say hello!

OK!

(whispering) They are taking drugs.

Oh...

Fuck. I said hello, but then they were frightened.
Tried not to scare them...
Didn't know what to say...
They didn't wanna talk either of course. Awkward situation.

Brrr... that's so Christiane F.

No one should have to sleep on Eduard-Müller square.
And if you're addicted you also shouldn't have to do that illegally.
Better offer safe spaces for them and keep them away from hiding in public places...

Right!

Nevertheless we are sharing this square at the moment. Them taking drugs behind us and us talking.

I keep thinking of all these films made here about Berlin like "Christiane F.", "Good Bye Lenin!" and...
What was it again...? All about change, and transition, and how to deal with it...
The one where they break into houses and put the furniture upside down...

"Die fetten Jahre sind vorbei."

Exactly!

What is this telling you about Berlin?

Well... the three protagonists are against the rich having too much money and too much power, so to speak, and want to educate them. It's like a wake-up call.

The film maker said: "We don't know where to put our revolutionary energy and we don't know how to fight the system".

Very much Berlin.

Hans Weingartner, the film maker was a political activist. They invade upper-class houses, rearrange the furniture, and leave notes saying: "Die Fette Jahre sind vorbei" or "Sie haben zu viel Geld." Signed with: "Die Erziehungsberechtigten" - The legal...

Hey, they are leaving.
Crossing Silbersteinstraße.
Look, they walk past this new condo on the corner.
Who invades whose territory?

Right. That's is always the question.
Ist Berlin noch zu retten?
Or shouldn't we complain so much?
Surely something good must come out of it for all of us?

Let me think. I really don't know...

To put it differently: Is there still a place for us in Berlin?

Well, spaces for art and creative production disappear more and more. That's a great loss for the city.
The effects of that loss will show later.

How?

Conformity!

Hahaha!
So more private commercial space instead of public shared space?

Yes!
And the facades look all the same...

Where are the last "free" spaces in Berlin?

Here for example!
But the drug users be like: can this place be saved?
Now the artists are coming!

Are we the gentrifiers?

In a lot of cases we are at least part of the process, yes!

This is exactly what the film PUSH talks about. Classical gentrification!

Yes!

The first sign that you have to leave your neighborhood?
Is when the artists arrive and when vintage clothing shops and yoga studios show up.
Then the housing prices go up, and then they're all going to get the push.

I think art is very often misused for purposes of upgrading neighborhoods. Many artists don't realize that.
How can neighborhoods stay diverse?
This is and was Berlin.
That type of Berlin should be saved.
I hate monocultures! Any kind of them!

Right.
Well, we all came to Berlin for the cheap rents...
We did...

The artists came because the city offered opportunities.
A lot of other people also came because of this.

I think there was nothing wrong with all of us coming to Berlin.
It made our work and life as artists possible.

And that effect accumulated in a vibrant cultural place and attracted more and more people.

Now this has become super problematic.

Ha – Darwinism again...

03

So what's your impression of this square now?

Well I still think it is a bit boring!

Could be a good thing for a site to contemplate, no?

Yes
But the noise of the traffic...

But it's much more quiet now at night!

Still the square is the outcome of a problem with urban planning and traffic, don't you think?
But I feel what you mean.
It has its beauty.

Haha, yes. Three intersecting streets with a void in the middle!

We need more voids, more empty spaces...

I think this is also why we and BETON are here. This square is a void, fallen out of time and focus.

Right

If you had to come up with a proposal for a new use of this square: what would your first idea be?

First thing I am thinking of is: clean out the square completely and don't have a small park - just space.
No regulations, no rules...

Hahah. You'd have to prevent anarchist parking in the first place!

But wouldn't that be nice?
Just an open space.

Utopia!

Yes, utopia...
...opportunities!

If there's no defensive architecture around the square, motorists would take the opportunity to park here.

Hmmm...

I prefer the green, though.
I would like to see some more animals.
I only discovered these small red bugs...
Not even rats are here!

Because of the traffic probably- hahaha!

There's a fox in this neighborhood!
It uses to steal shoes, that people leave in front of their doors!
Drags them to the courtyards and hides them in the bushes.
Like in "Die fetten Jahre sind vorbei"!

We had a raccoon on the roof who came to visit us every day for some food.
He lived in the chimney pipe.

There's a parallel city around us.

Maybe they have been forced out of their natural habitat by structural change, and an abundance of food and lack of predators make cities a good home.

Opposed to your empty square, I would like this place to be totally overgrown.
Left on its own. An impenetrable thicket.
Just the sidewalks around would be kept open.

City greenery has gained more political traction because of climate change.
I read there is a guideline that every Berliner has a right to 6m² of green space within 500m from their home.
Do you know more than 30% of Berlin is public green space. Not bad!

If the kids from this neighborhood crawl inside, they find remains of benches, rubble from World War II, a sleeping bag...
and lots of shoes...