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Adaptive Cycles of Resistance: Counterculture and Gentrification in Berlin SO36

David Till

Department of Human Geography and Urban Studies, Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences, Faculty of Sciences, University of Pécs, Hungary
david999@gamma.ttk.pte.hu
https://orcid.org/0009-0003-6672-2559

Abstract: *Countercultural spaces occupy a contradictory position in gentrifying neighbourhoods: they challenge the commodification of housing while contributing to the symbolic distinctiveness that makes urban areas attractive to external investment. This article examines how the legalisation and institutionalisation of formerly occupied buildings transformed this relationship in Berlin SO36. Drawing on historical sources, the Berlin Besetzt database, and fieldwork conducted between 2023 and 2025, the study identified 114 documented occupations, 56 of which remained recognisable through countercultural markers or continued collective activities. Interpreting their trajectories through Holling's adaptive cycle reveals that institutionalisation did not simply strengthen or weaken their resilience. Cooperative and collective ownership protected particular buildings from speculative acquisition and preserved elements of self-management, but it also reduced the flexibility and expansion capacity associated with squatting. The article conceptualises this uneven outcome as 'selective resilience': resilience became stronger at the level of individual housing projects but weaker at the level of the broader movement. This distinction connects the organisational transformation of countercultural housing initiatives with wider debates on gentrification and neighbourhood commodification.*

Keywords: gentrification; spatial production; counterculture; Berlin

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Introduction

Berlin's SO36 district has long been regarded as one of Europe's most prominent centres of countercultural and subcultural activity. Since the 1970s, squatter movements, punk communities, autonomous political organisations, artistic collectives, and alternative housing initiatives have played a decisive role in shaping the area's social and spatial development (Drissel 2011; Hochmuth 2017, 2021; Holm and Kuhn 2011). Yet the relationship between these communities and the process of gentrification remains deeply contradictory. While alternative social practices frequently challenge the commodification of urban space (Smith 2002), they may simultaneously increase the symbolic value and attractiveness of neighbourhoods, thereby contributing to the very processes they oppose (Thornton 1995). This article examines this contradiction through the case of Kreuzberg SO36 (Figure 1). Drawing upon historical sources, field observations, and C. S. Holling's panarchy framework, it argues that countercultural communities act simultaneously as agents of resistance and as unintended drivers of urban transformation (Holling 2001).

Existing studies have primarily focused either on displacement and real-estate dynamics (Smith 2002) or on the cultural practices of subcultural communities themselves (Hebdige 1979; Thornton 1995). Comparatively little attention has been devoted to the contradictory relationship between these two processes and to the ways in which countercultural practices may simultaneously resist and facilitate urban transformation.

Following Lefebvre (1991), urban space is understood here both as a social product and as a means of production. Building on David Harvey's interpretation of the right to the city, urban space can also be conceptualised as a site of conflict in which local communities, political institutions, and market actors compete to shape the urban environment (Harvey 2008; Soja 1980).

Historically marked by marginalisation, migration, and political activism, SO36 is an especially suitable case in which to examine these processes. The district's dense network of autonomous spaces offers an opportunity to explore how grassroots initiatives influence the pace, form, and social consequences of gentrification (Hochmuth 2017; Holm and Kuhn 2011; Verlaan 2020).

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Figure 1: The location of Kreuzberg within Berlin



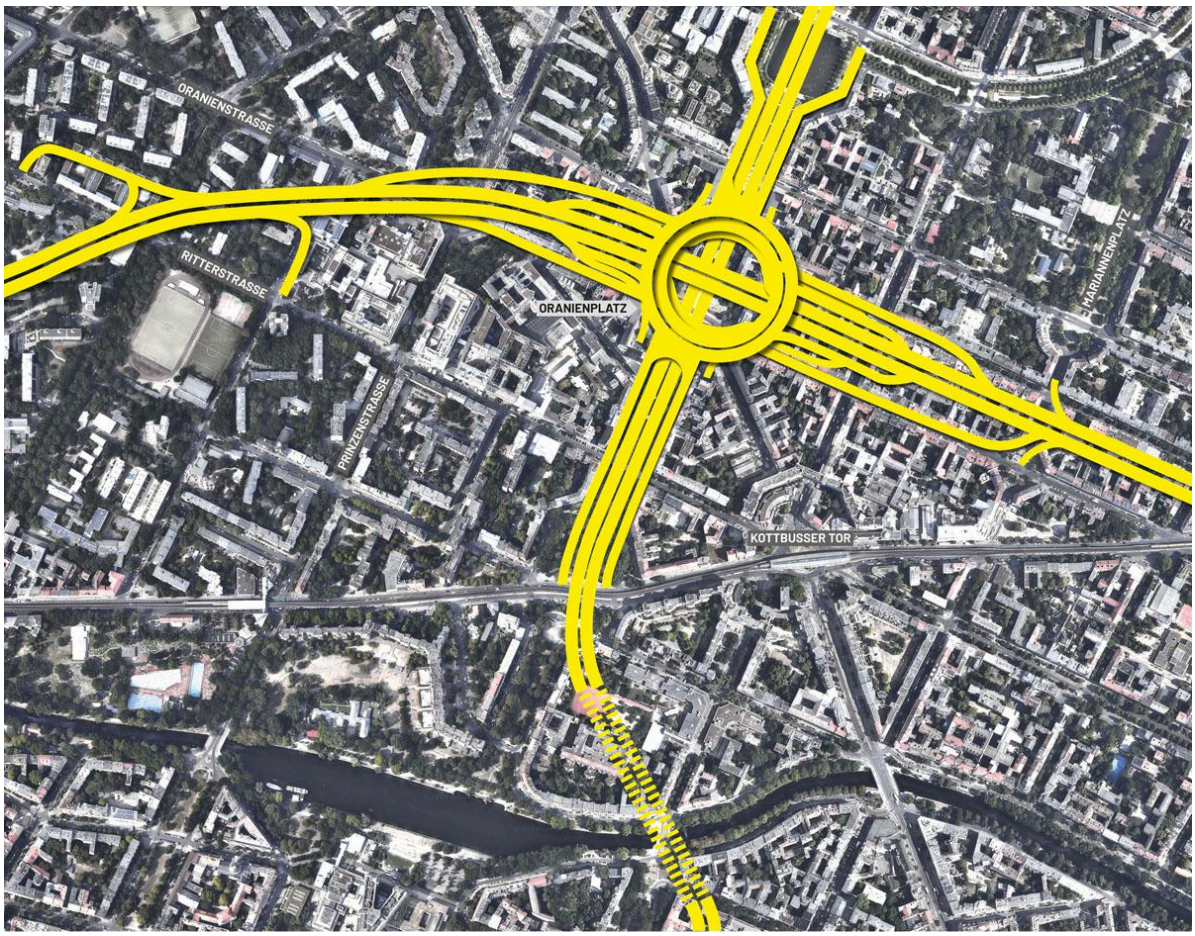
Source: https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kreuzberg#/media/File:Kreuzberg.png

The historical background of SO36

The contemporary socio-spatial configuration of SO36 can only be understood through its historically contingent development. A central question of this study is how a countercultural enclave of this scale could emerge and persist in close proximity to a metropolitan centre, despite sustained gentrification pressures. The transformation of the area began in the 1960s with modernist urban renewal plans in West Berlin. One of the most significant proposals was the construction of a highway interchange at Oranienplatz, intended to integrate Kreuzberg into an automobile-oriented urban system (Aust 1965) (see Figure 2). Although never realised due to strong local resistance and political risks, the project contributed to long-term uncertainty, accelerating outmigration and disinvestment.

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Figure 2: Planned highway intersection at Oranienplatz according to the West Berlin land-use plan, 1965



Source: https://immermodern.de/strassen-von-heute/bundesallee

During the decades of division, SO36 occupied a position of internal peripherality. Surrounded on three sides by the Berlin Wall and bordered by the Landwehr Canal, the district became spatially and economically isolated. Former commercial streets lost their function, and the housing stock deteriorated due to the lack of private investment. By the early 1970s, SO36 had become one of West Berlin's most deprived neighbourhoods, predominantly inhabited by migrant workers – especially those of Turkish origin – as well as low-income households and elderly residents (Hochmuth 2017). At the same time, the area began attracting a young population drawn by low rents, vacant buildings, and the suspension of compulsory military service in West Berlin. This demographic shift played a crucial role in reshaping the neighbourhood's social and cultural landscape.

From the 1970s onwards, squatting movements emerged as a defining spatial practice, transforming vacant properties into sites of collective living and political expression (Figure 3). The scale of these activities expanded significantly in the 1980s. While only a handful of buildings were occupied in the 1970s, the following decade saw the emergence of dozens of squats, many of which became long-term fixtures. These spaces functioned not only as housing alternatives but also as hubs of countercultural production. Importantly, not all activities were primarily aimed at securing housing; equally important objectives were visibility and political mobilisation, drawing attention to housing shortages and rising rents (Drissel 2011). Conflicts between squatters and state authorities intensified during this period, culminating in violent confrontations, particularly in the early 1980s. However, these struggles also strengthened local networks

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and contributed to a collective identity centred on resistance. Events such as the 1987 May Day riots, during which police control over parts of the district temporarily collapsed, marked a turning point by demonstrating the effectiveness of organised urban protest.

Figure 3: Squatted buildings in the SO36 area



Source: Author's own elaboration based on Berlin Besetzt (2025), and fieldwork data.

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, SO36 became reintegrated into the broader urban fabric. During the 1990s, increasing investment, the legalisation of several squats, and the growing international visibility of Berlin gradually transformed many formerly marginal spaces into highly valued cultural assets (Haeussermann and Kapphan 2004; Hochmuth 2021; Siemer and Matthews-Hunter 2017). Over time, however, these spaces acquired considerable symbolic value. Squats, music venues, and autonomous social centres gradually became part of the neighbourhood's identity and contributed to its increasing cultural attractiveness. Consequently, practices originally intended to resist commodification were themselves progressively incorporated into the symbolic economy of the district (Smith 2002; Thornton 1995; Zukin 1989).

From the 2000s onwards, processes of gentrification, tourism growth, and real estate speculation increasingly shaped the district. Although the number of new occupations declined, many formerly squatted buildings remained active as legalised housing cooperatives, social centres, and cultural institutions.

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One of the most notable conflicts of the post-reunification period was the opposition to the Media Spree development project. This large-scale urban redevelopment plan aimed to transform the Spree riverfront into a hub for media industries, offices, and commercial infrastructure. Local residents mobilised against what they perceived as the privatisation of public space and the acceleration of gentrification. The 2008 referendum, in which a large majority supported restrictions on the project, forced significant modifications and demonstrated the continued relevance of grassroots activism. Beyond its local impact, the 'Media Spree versenken' campaign became emblematic of broader struggles against neoliberal urban development, highlighting the importance of civic participation in shaping urban spaces (Ahlfeldt 2010; Scharenberg and Bader 2009).

Urban transformation through the panarchy framework

Urban neighbourhoods are not static spatial structures but complex systems shaped by the interaction of grassroots practices, institutional regulations, and capital investment (Allen 1997; Batty 2005). Their transformation therefore involves both adaptation and conflict: local actors respond to external pressures while seeking to preserve particular social functions, spatial practices, and organisational structures. Resilience in this context does not necessarily imply a return to a previous condition. It may also involve reorganisation into a new configuration, although adaptation can preserve certain functions while transforming or weakening others (Folke 2006).

Political-economic approaches provide powerful explanations for how capital accumulation, property investment, and uneven development drive gentrification (Harvey 2006; Smith 2002). However, they are less directly concerned with how locally embedded communities reorganise themselves over time in response to these pressures, or how their adaptive practices may produce unintended consequences. The panarchy framework is used here not as an alternative to political-economic explanations, but as a complementary analytical device for tracing the changing resilience, connectedness, and institutionalisation of countercultural spaces. It therefore helps explain how practices initially directed against commodification may gradually become stabilised, appropriated, and incorporated into the transformation of the neighbourhood.

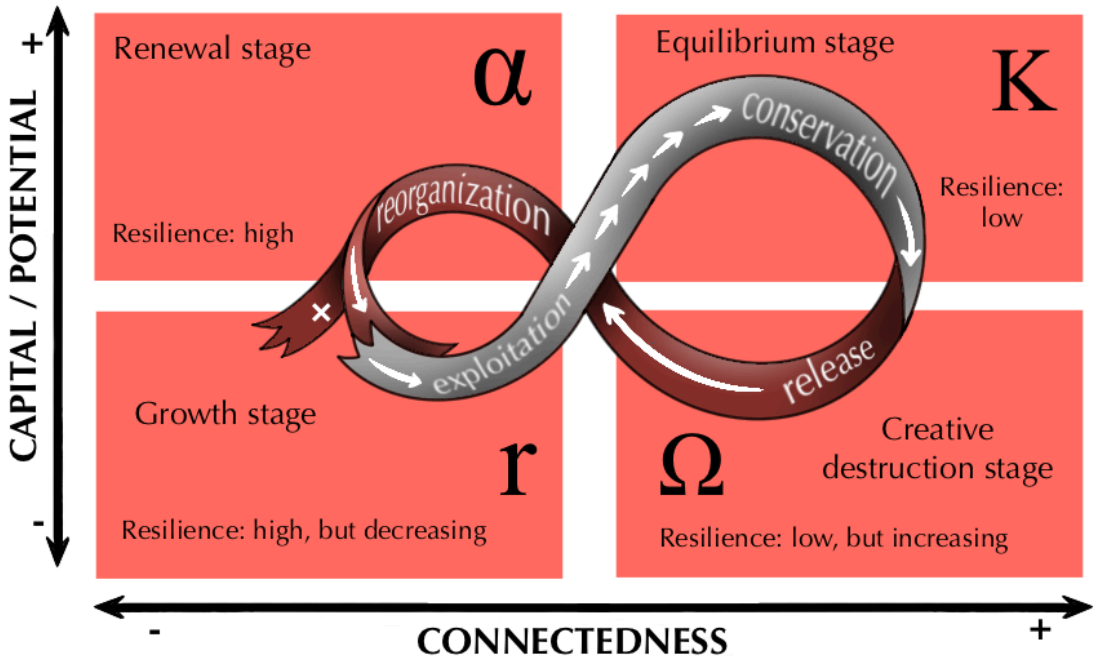
To analyse these processes in SO36, this article applies Holling's panarchy framework (Figure 4), which conceptualises change through adaptive cycles structured by accumulated potential, connectedness, and resilience (Holling 2001). The model distinguishes four phases: release (Ω), reorganisation (α), growth (r), and conservation (K). It also emphasises interactions across spatial and temporal scales. Rapid local changes may destabilise slower and larger institutional structures through 'revolt', while established structures shape subsequent local reorganisation through 'remember'.

In this study, the adaptive cycle is applied specifically to the historical development of SO36′s network of occupied and subsequently legalised countercultural spaces. Release refers to the disruption of established housing arrangements and the availability of vacant buildings; reorganisation to the formation of autonomous collectives and networks; growth to the expansion and increasing visibility of occupied spaces; and conservation to their legal and organisational stabilisation. This application makes it possible to examine a central contradiction: legalisation may protect particular buildings from immediate displacement, while simultaneously reducing organisational flexibility and incorporating formerly autonomous spaces into the institutional structures of the neighbourhood.

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The distinction between the frontloop and backloop is consequently treated as a distinction between phases rather than fixed categories of actors. Countercultural initiatives may emerge through rapid experimentation in the backloop but gradually enter the more stable and rigid conditions of the frontloop through legalisation and institutionalisation.

Figure 4: The adaptive cycle model



Source: Author's own elaboration.

The transformation of urban space in SO36 through the adaptive cycle

The spatial practices associated with countercultural production in SO36 – most notably squatting – follow a distinct pattern that can be meaningfully interpreted through the stages of Holling's adaptive cycle. By occupying, repairing, and collectively managing vacant buildings, these groups altered both the use of particular properties and the organisation of housing at the neighbourhood level.

The first documented occupation in SO36 took place on 3 July 1971, when attendees of a Ton Steine Scherben concert occupied two floors of a vacant factory building at Mariannenplatz 13. Although the police cleared the building shortly afterwards, the action was followed on 8 December by the occupation of the former nurses' residence of Bethanien Hospital. It was renamed the Georg-von-Rauch-Haus and later acquired legal status as one of the neighbourhood's longest-lasting countercultural housing projects. The contrasting trajectories of these two early occupations – rapid eviction and institutional stabilisation – already point to the different pathways later taken by occupied spaces in SO36 (Brown 2009).

Early initiatives were often short-lived, but they contributed to the emergence of a persistent conflict between local communities and state authorities, rooted in housing shortages, declining living conditions, and the mismatch between top-down urban policies and local needs (Verlaan 2020). By the 1980s, squatting had expanded significantly, both in scale and organisation. What had initially been sporadic actions evolved into a widespread and structured movement, with dozens of occupied buildings forming a decentralised

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yet interconnected network. The scale and long-term spatial legacy of this expansion are visible in the compiled database of occupations. Based on Berlin Besetzt, historical sources, and field verification conducted between 2023 and 2025, the study identified 114 documented occupations within the SO36 study area. During the latest field survey, 56 buildings remained identifiable as sites connected to the area's countercultural history. This classification was based on the continued presence of visible countercultural markers – including movement flags, political graffiti, stickers, banners, posters, and references to former occupations – and, in some cases, ongoing collective housing and social or cultural activities. Although the majority of these buildings subsequently acquired some form of legal or contractual status, only nine could not be demonstrated to have been legalised. The persistence of these sites therefore does not indicate the survival of squatting in its original form, but rather the selective stabilisation of particular spatial identities, activities, and organisational arrangements.

Within the panarchy framework, the breakdown of established housing arrangements and the availability of vacant buildings during the initial wave of occupations correspond to the release (Ω) phase. Phases within this framework should not be understood as sharply separated chronological periods: during the rapid expansion of the early 1980s, release, reorganisation, and growth overlapped across different buildings and collectives. Vacant and deteriorating housing stock became accessible because of disinvestment and planned but unrealised redevelopment. These liminal spaces enabled the emergence of alternative forms of spatial production, where housing was redefined as a collective and experimental practice. Beyond providing housing, occupied buildings became sites of political organisation, cultural production, and collective identity formation, which contributed to the neighbourhood's growing symbolic significance (Bourdieu 1986; Gottdiener 1993). Processes associated with reorganisation (α) became visible as initially dispersed squatting groups developed more stable autonomous collectives, often based on horizontal decision-making. Their decentralised organisation enhanced adaptability because the eviction or dissolution of one collective did not necessarily disrupt the broader network. This organisational model also contributed to the emergence of strong local connectedness. Social ties, shared values, and collective identity reinforced the cohesion of countercultural communities, enabling them to persist despite ongoing external pressures. At the same time, their relative autonomy from formal institutional frameworks limited their access to legal protection and long-term stability. The growth (r) phase is reflected in the rapid expansion and increasing visibility of these practices during the 1980s. The expansion of the network and its growing cultural visibility transformed SO36 into a major centre of alternative urban culture. However, this phase also introduced new contradictions. As certain locations gained symbolic and cultural significance, they became increasingly fixed in space, reducing the flexibility that had initially characterised the movement. Simultaneously, processes of legalisation began to reshape the movement. Many squatted buildings were gradually integrated into formal housing systems through rental agreements or cooperative ownership models.

Institutional stabilisation took several organisational forms. Luisenstadt eG, founded in 1986 to manage five formerly occupied buildings and one rental property, preserved collective housing through cooperative arrangements. Oranienstraße 45 (O45) followed a distinct trajectory: occupied in 1980, legalised in 1983, and purchased in 2004. It now operates as a self-managed rental property within the Mietshäuser Syndikat. By limiting speculative resale, these models reduced the flexibility associated with occupation, while strengthening long-term protection against displacement. Institutionalisation thus shifted resilience from movement-based adaptability towards property-based security. Legalisation therefore preserved particular projects while making their continued existence dependent on contractual, financial, and organisational structures – a form of adaptive resilience achieved through institutional compromise (Pirisi 2019).

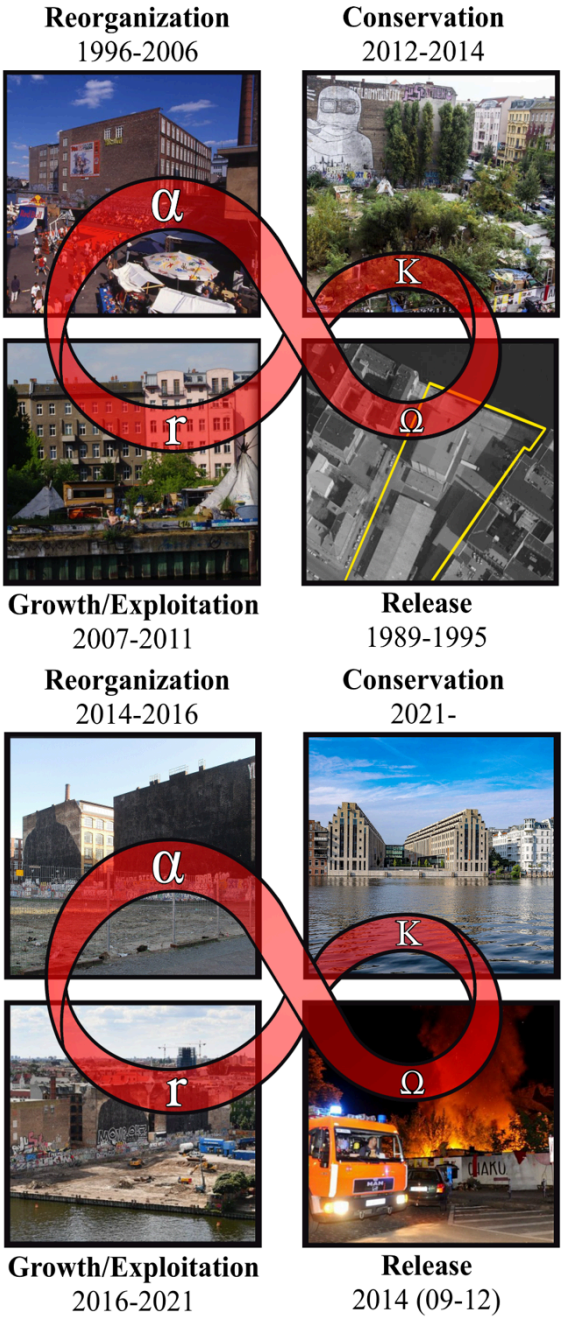
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The conservation (K) phase became more visible after reunification, as legalised housing projects acquired stable organisational and contractual structures. At the same time, the surrounding neighbourhood experienced increasing investment and rent pressure. Legalisation protected particular buildings, but it could not prevent the broader transformation of SO36. Countercultural spaces consequently became more secure in their immediate locations but less capable of expanding through occupation or rapidly adapting to changing conditions. Formerly marginalised areas such as SO36 become attractive to investors, triggering processes of gentrification that fundamentally alter the social composition of the neighbourhood. Rising rents and property prices place increasing pressure on long-term residents, particularly those with lower incomes. For countercultural communities, this phase involved not a simple decline but a transformation of resilience: movement-based adaptability decreased, while the tenure security of particular buildings increased. As spatial practices become institutionalised and embedded in legal frameworks, their capacity for rapid adaptation diminishes. At the same time, their continued existence often depends on mechanisms that are themselves part of the broader system they initially sought to resist. This dynamic reveals a central contradiction. Countercultural practices contributed to the cultural and symbolic distinctiveness of SO36, while the value associated with this distinctiveness could subsequently be incorporated into neighbourhood branding and market-oriented representations of the area. This does not imply that countercultural communities caused gentrification. Rather, the symbolic value they produced became part of a broader transformation that was primarily driven by property investment, uneven development, and rising housing demand.

To conclude this section, Figure 5 applies the panarchy framework to the transformation of the Cuvrybrache. During the Cold War, the site served as a storage area, but after German reunification it lost this function and became available for informal recreation. Although the site had been privately owned since 1992, the Young African Art Market (YAAM) established a cultural venue there in 1996. Subsequent bottom-up initiatives consolidated the site as a countercultural hub and a contested space between autonomous use and private ownership. During the growth phase, expanding cultural practices and symbolic visibility intensified the social appropriation of the site, while also increasing its attractiveness for market-led redevelopment. In 2012, an informal settlement emerged, creating a diverse social ecosystem and a symbolic battleground over poverty, migration, cultural production, and the right to the city. Prolonged disputes between the Berlin Senate and the developer facilitated the settlement's temporary survival, while inadequate infrastructure and negative media coverage increased its vulnerability. Following a fire on 18 September 2014, the settlement was evicted and the site enclosed. This release ended the countercultural cycle, while enabling the start of a second, market-led cycle: ownership control was reasserted, development plans were mobilised, and construction consolidated the site's commercial use. The completed Cuvry Campus opened in 2021 (Lydssan 2020).

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Figure 5: The transformation of the Cuvrybrache through the panarchy adaptive-cycle model



Note: First cycle: Ω: https://www.air.blnmap.de/foto/, α: https://www.citytoolbox.net/journal/two-decades-of-activism-on-the-cuvrybrache-part-i/, r: https://futurberlin.de/die-cuvrybrache-an-der-spree-favela-mit-erklaerungsbeduerftigem-sternchen, K: https://www.morgenpost.de/bezirke/friedrichshain-kreuzberg/article134559793/Denkmalschutz-fuer-Wandbild-der-Cuvrybrache-gefordert.html, second cycle: Ω: https://www.citytoolbox.net/journal/two-decades-of-activism-on-the-cuvrybrache-part-ii/, α: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cuvrybrache_Berlin-Kreuzberg_01.jpg, r: https://www.citytoolbox.net/journal/two-decades-of-activism-on-the-cuvrybrache-part-ii/, K: https://www.orte-der-einheit.de/en/cuvry-brache/

Source: Author's elaboration based on Gunderson and Holling (2002).

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Discussion: housing, power, and resistance

The findings complicate interpretations of squatting as either resistance to gentrification or a precursor to it. The continued visibility of 56 formerly occupied buildings demonstrates the persistence of countercultural spatial identities in SO36, but their predominantly legalised status also indicates a change in the form of resistance. The cases of Luisenstadt eG and O45 show that institutionalisation can preserve collective housing, protect particular buildings from speculative acquisition, and maintain elements of self-management. However, these building-level protections did not prevent increasing investment and housing pressure across the surrounding neighbourhood.

Building on the understanding of resilience as a dynamic and multiscalar process (Folke 2006; Holling 2001), this article conceptualises this outcome as 'selective resilience'. Legalisation and collective ownership strengthened the long-term security of particular housing projects, while reducing the flexibility and expansion capacity associated with occupation. Resilience was therefore redistributed rather than simply increased or diminished: it became stronger at the level of individual buildings but weaker at the level of the broader movement. This distinction contributes to gentrification research by connecting neighbourhood-level political-economic change with the changing organisational capacity of local housing initiatives. Countercultural practices did not cause gentrification, but the symbolic distinctiveness they produced could be incorporated into a broader process driven by property investment and uneven development (Holm and Kuhn 2011; Smith 2002).

Conclusion

This article examined how the institutionalisation of countercultural housing spaces in Berlin SO36 altered their capacity to resist gentrification. Interpreting their historical trajectories through the adaptive cycle demonstrates that legalisation did not simply strengthen or weaken resilience. Instead, it shifted resilience from movement-based adaptability towards the long-term security of particular buildings. Cooperative ownership and self-management protected some formerly occupied properties from speculative acquisition and displacement, while reducing the flexibility and expansion capacity associated with squatting.

The findings therefore reveal a pattern of selective resilience: protection became stronger at the level of individual housing projects but remained limited at the neighbourhood level, where investment and housing pressure continued. Countercultural communities did not cause gentrification, although the symbolic distinctiveness they produced could be incorporated into market-oriented representations of the area. While this single case cannot establish the causal effect of countercultural production on property values or displacement, it demonstrates why gentrification research should consider how grassroots housing practices change through legalisation and institutionalisation.

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