Threats and hopes for abandoned buildings in Berlin: an urban exploration approach

Amenazas y esperanzas para los edificios abandonados de Berlín: Una aproximación desde la exploración urbana

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Abstract. Abandoned buildings have become a distinguishing mark for the recent history and alternative spirit of Berlin. The growth in popularity of urban exploration, which focuses in illegally trespassing these neglected places, has made Berlin a hotspot for such a subculture, whose practitioners express an extreme sensibility about the current and future state of the buildings they explore. Through this perspective, the present article identifies three main threats towards the buildings: a touristification phenomenon created by urban exploration; commodification as a result of this touristification; and the increasing gentrification in the city that ignores the tangible and intangible qualities of the buildings. By critically reviewing these aspects, the article concludes proposing 'informal re-appropriation' as an integrated solution that prioritizes public participation and slow urban development over neoliberal immediate revenues, where minimal interventions contribute to preserve Berlin's unique aesthetics embedded in its abandoned buildings.

Resumen. Los edificios abandonados se han convertido en una seña de identidad de la reciente historia y el espíritu alternativo de Berlín. La creciente popularidad de la exploración urbana, que se centra en adentrarse ilegalmente en estos espacios, ha hecho de Berlín un núcleo importante de dicha subcultura, cuyos miembros poseen una tremenda sensibilidad por el estado presente y futuro de los edificios que exploran. A través de este enfoque, el artículo identifica tres amenazas que se ciernen sobre los edificios: turistificación creada por la propia exploración urbana; comodificación como resultado de dicha turistificación; y la progresiva gentrificación de una ciudad que ignora las cualidades tangibles e intangibles de sus edificios. Tras una lectura crítica de estos aspectos, el artículo termina proponiendo la 'reapropiación informal' como solución integradora que prioriza la participación pública y un desarrollo urbano más lento frente a los beneficios económicos inmediatos que garantiza el neoliberalismo, donde las intervenciones mínimas contribuyan a preservar la particularidad estética de Berlín enraizada en sus edificios abandonados.

Introduction and methods

Due to the political, social and economic changes that Berlin experimented in its recent history, a large amount of abandoned buildings punctuate the city still today (Colomb, 2012). Their lack of function and peculiar decayed aesthetics contributed to forge the subcultural and 'trashy' image of Berlin, which is unique among the rest of European capitals (Girot, 2004; Sheridan, 2007; Untiks, 2012). In this sense, the subculture of urban exploration puts its major focus on illegally trespassing abandoned buildings with the purpose of rendering them visible while denouncing the limited availability of public space (Garrett, 2013). Urban exploration then opens new debates in terms of current state of conservation, prospective uses, and the relation of these buildings with the on-going development in our cities. Being extendable to the rest of the society, this article investigates the main urban concerns expressed by Berlin-based explorers, adding new perspectives coming from a transgressive community which is increasingly being considered in Urban Studies.

Apart of using an interdisciplinary theoretical background applied to Urban Studies, the methods used in this research are mostly empirical. Fieldwork consisted in trespassing over 20 abandoned buildings in Berlin during a four-month period dating from April to July 2014. During this time, I collected fieldnotes that serve as a first-hand testimony. In addition to this, I interviewed the well-known urban explorer

Ciarán Fahey, author of the website 'Abandoned Berlin', reaching the point of accompanying him in some of his infiltrations. I also interviewed Berlin-based urban explorer Nathan Wright, who runs a meeting point for explorers in this city, the Cozmic Gallery Photo Club. Finally, these qualitative methods were supplemented by an interview to Thilo Wiebers, the founder of the company 'Go2know', which focuses in offering photo-tours and photo-workshops through Berlin's abandoned buildings.

Urban exploration: a victim of its own success?

Just by googling 'urban exploration' one can find thousands of images of abandoned buildings on the internet. Urban exploration uses photography's visual capacity and direct effect to promote its alternative and illicit spirit while providing an aestheticized version of dereliction. Though it is an international fractured subculture (Garrett, 2014), a point of encounter is that its imagery shares the same photographic and architectural elements all over the world (Gibas, 2010). This fascination has been labelled as 'ruin porn' in order to explain 'why we can't take our eyes off images of old buildings and decrepit interiors' (Greco, 2012). On the other hand, it would be unfair not to mention that for Bradley Garrett (2011a), urban exploration has less to do with the aesthetics of decay than with the fact of 'experiencing the world', however, it cannot be denied that urban exploration relies in its imagery to gain popular acceptance and curiosity[1].

Marc Augé (1998) criticizes how today, when the bombardment of pictures plays an essential role in fast-information consumption, tourists seek for a preconceived image of the places they visit instead of looking for an authentic experience. Augé asserts that this kind of disposition makes tourists to follow the given path, finding what is valuable for others since they do not trust their own intuition. John Urry (2002) calls this phenomenon the 'tourist gaze', a way to inspire the desire for travel through new possibilities of image reproduction. Regarding the current tourism democratization, as well as the factual omnipresence of digital cameras, people rely on repeating the same experiences they have already seen in previous pictures on the basis of common and high expectations (Markwell, 1997), "where the pictures circulating around sights are more important than the sites themselves" (Crang; cited in Thurlow and Jaworski, 2011, p. 222).

In a critical sense, this ultimately means that the main purpose of a journey is the photographic representation of it, and urban exploration does not escape from this reality. In this regard, the authenticity of urban exploration is questionable, arguing that pictures can work as final trophies standing over its actual experimental component and the abandoned buildings where it takes place. One might say that the website 'Abandoned Berlin', created in 2010 by urban explorer Ciarán Fahey, serves as a sort of guidebook providing exact details about the history of the buildings and the way to get there. Visited by an average of 4,000 people per day, in his posts, Fahey recounts his own experiences in abandoned buildings providing a large amount of pictures. This amateur production is an added value that catches the attention of the readers and arouses the desire to visit Berlin's abandoned buildings. To demonstrate this, here are only some random comments that certain readers wrote in different posts:

> *"Nice post, will definitely try to stop by there in the summer".*

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[1] Another aspect that is worth to mention is how explorers are usually white, middle-class men between their twenties and their thirties (Garrett 2013), something that leads us to think that they belong to a privileged community or a type of Florida's 'creative class' (2005). A large amount of scholars would see such a condition as an increasing factor for the threats discussed in this article (i.e. touristification, commodification, gentrification). Though it is not my intention to go deeper into this debate, this ultimately shows the suitability of asking whether urban exploration is a victim of its own success.

"I've of course seen the abandoned buildings - but never dreamed of entering. Gotta be the good little American girl! I'm inspired. Love the pics/advice".

"I'm coming to Berlin early May and plan on exploring one or two of these great spots you tell us about".

"Great shots, thanks for reporting about this place. I will go there soon".

These are usually replied by Ciarán Fahey, so a direct communication between reader and writer is established, creating a sort of confident and trustful relation. However, Fahey is perfectly aware of the fact that it is always better to leave certain things unsaid so everyone can enjoy his own experience. In his post *'Krampnitz: Nazi and Soviet Military Complex'*, the mere attraction of an image is simply evident. The location became popular because there is an original Nazi mosaic representing an eagle clutching a swastika with its claws (Fig. 1). The eagle was suddenly a must-see element to look for in an exploration day. Up to the moment I am writing this, the post has received 143 comments accumulated over a period of seven years, and many of these refer to how to find the highlight. One of the readers provided the eagle's exact location in a comment, and Fahey decided to remove it explaining the reason for this in another comment:

> *"I'm very sorry but I removed it as I feel it's against the point of urban exploration to provide detailed instructions on EXACTLY where the eagle is located. Surely the whole point of urban exploration is the 'exploration', the feeling you don't know what's around the corner, what you will find around the next wall you look, at the bottom of the next hole you look in? It's not hard to find the eagle if you just look for the damn thing, and looking for it is most of the fun. If you just want to see it and nothing else, then there's a picture of it published on the blog for those who are so inclined. Yes, I know there's a hypocrisy of providing detailed instructions on how to get to these places, but I think once you find the places it's up to you to explore".*

Fahey's complain fits into the definition of what Nassim Taleb (2012, p. 76) calls 'touristification'. As if people only counted with simplified mechanical responses, touristification is 'the systematic removal of uncertainty and randomness from things, trying to make matters highly predictable in their smallest details'. However, Fahey is not the only explorer who criticizes the touristification taking place in abandoned buildings. Berlin-based explorer Nathan Wright complained about this situation also in *Krampnitz*:

> *"Krampnitz is the model example of that because it has the 'swastika', located in a building right on the front and only urban exploration tourists hit that precise building and they are off [...] So these explorers don't do the rest of Krampnitz, all they are interested in is going inside and say 'look at this, look at that'. Lots of them have full frame cameras and none of them print anything, their images go to Flickr – 72dpi [...] They don't explore anything. I explore, and when I go to a building I'll go through every part of that building, every single part that I can possibly get into. I will see everything in that building: I go all the way up the stairs, down the stairs, every single room, cellars, looking on the corners, etc. I literally explore every detail, if there is a tunnel system I want to know every part of the tunnel by the end of the day. It took me lots of visits to fully map Krampnitz!"* (personal interview, 7 May 2014).

At this point, Wright mentions two remarkable concepts. First, he refers to urban exploration 'tourists', which in this sense should be understood under a pejorative connotation in comparison to him as a 'real' explorer. The difference is established in the same way we distinguish the 'typical tourists' or 'Turistas vulgaris' as mass visitors with little interest in 'really' learning (Löfgren, 1999), juxtaposed against the 'traveller' as more educated/independent being and committed with the destination (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2011). Secondly, Wright talks about seeing 'your pictures in a computer screen', where it is also assumed the tendency to share pictures due to the trendy existence of social networks like *Flickr*. These democratic methods provide a global and inexpensive display of activities where photographs serve as mass-produced objects rendering the world visible and appealing (Larsen, 2006).

Fig. 1. Original Nazi mosaic at Krampnitz
Source: Ciarán Fahey, 2010. Reproduced with permission of the author

However, the influence of 'Abandoned Berlin' is not merely to breed the ground for armchair exploration. As a website, its intangible property is to provide the actual possibility of feeling an abandoned building and its uncertain nature. This has a lot to do with what Garrett (2011b) describes as 'mutable qualities of decay' meaning that every exploration is different from the other. Indeed, taking a look to the hundreds of comments in 'Abandoned Berlin' it is easy to find people's interest in recounting their own experiences because they always vary. Many comments start by 'I was there last week and…' or 'I've always seen this place from outside but when I got in…' It is hard to imagine such a thing in mass tourism destinations like the Eiffel Tower of the Coliseum, where the experience is already set up and everyone is expected to come across it in the same way.

Commodification of abandoned buildings as heritage attractions

Commodification, or the process through which amenities are bought and sold (Goulding, 2000), is developed by some companies in Berlin to make money using abandoned buildings as if they were actual heritage attractions. David Harvey (2001), although providing a broader scope in the origins of heritage, recognizes that our current perception dates from 1970s when we started to see it as a market product aligned with commercial purposes. This thought is shared by Laurajane Smith, who puts in question the cultural implications and social gaining of converting heritage sites into any kind of museum. This author states that the simple act of managing and conserving a site represents an artificial reality, and these obsessed policies 'are *done to* sites and places, but are not seen as organically part of the meaning-making process of heritage itself' (2006, p. 94). Then, we can ensure that treating something as 'heritage', with the commodification policies that this entails, may well threat its authentic cultural status, shaping its original nature in the view of potential visitors.

During the last few years, several companies have emerged in order to exploit the alternative character of Berlin embedded in its abandoned buildings. One of these is 'Go2know', a company that exploits the

marketing component of nine derelict sites by organizing photo-tours for 40 Euros. This is a business model that has been the object of critiques by the urban exploration community for transforming the mere abandonment of a place into economic revenue while erasing the transgressive and experimental nature of the practice and turning it into a commodity. In my interview to Nathan Wright he passionately expressed his anger towards 'Go2Know':

> *"I hate 'Go2know', I can't stand them. They're charging €40 to let you go into a building on a weekend and people will pay this money. They are making money out of it and I don't like them at all because they establish limitations of what you can do. What I do is to slip past security guys or sneaking in through small holes and I experience the pleasure of seeing things I wouldn't normally see. But if you make a tour they will tell you what to do"* (personal interview, 7 May 2014).

In general, Wright's view is shared by the urban exploration community. It seems a contradiction trying to commodify an experience as urban exploration since its reason to be is completely opposed to enjoy it as if it was a facility. For explorers, it seems evident that 'you can't buy real experiences' (Garrett, 2014, p. 4) and something actually requiring admission and 'labelled an "experience" is pretty much guaranteed to be exactly the opposite' (Ninjalicious; cited in McRae, 2008, p. 76). Explorers do not seek for a passive construction of the past built upon official narratives, and they rather propose an individual engagement and interactive experience that leads towards the creation of their own interpretation because 'unregulated experiences in ruins tell us much about ourselves as about the places we explore' (Garrett, 2011b, p. 1064). It is then not surprising that explorers refuse any sort of official recognition towards abandoned buildings that may directly lead to carry out economic tourist activities in them. In this sense, abandoned buildings have to remain neglected by the institutions in order to conserve their appeal (Rowsdower, 2011). Any attempt to commodify both the sites and the exploration practice in an artificial manner would only contribute to create new neoliberal consumption spots in the city – putting in question whether Berlin's unique alternative atmosphere would still be present.

I confronted these thoughts with Thilo Wiebers, who is one of 'Go2know' managers, and he expressed his own concern about abandoned buildings. The two persons who founded 'Go2know' are actual photographers with a long tradition in capturing the aesthetics of decay and illegal trespassing during the 1980s. Obviously, they do not hide the intention in earning their living from photo-tours, yet Wiebers does not consider that charging €40 for an admission ticket is overpriced. According to him, a certain percentage of this fee goes to the actual owners of the properties with whom 'Go2know' made arrangements to exploit them while they are abandoned. He assumes that this price is not affordable for everyone but, on the other hand, his clients' profile responds rather to people that would only visit such places in case it is safe and legal.

Wiebers assumes that the main interest in 'Go2know' tours relies in the aesthetics and, in fact, most of the visitors are photographers and film-makers. However, as he poses, 'you don't want to have people there without knowing what they are taking pictures of' (personal interview, 27 June 2014), and to overcome this, every tour includes a brief introduction about the history of the place. This demonstrates the existence of heritage interpretation, something that according to him does not necessarily mean that the experimental component of the place is lost. Opposed to urban exploration's perspective, freedom in this sense is rather related to the notion of knowing that you are not doing something illegal, and there is no need to keep an eye on any security guard. To reinforce his statement, Wiebers proposes an alternative definition of how urban exploration could also be perceived – something that goes beyond the experimental component and reaches social implications:

"But does urban exploration have to be always illegal? I think urban exploration can be more comfortable if you try the legal way, trying to make contact with the owner and trying to figure out what's in there. Explorers could ask 'What are you going to do with the place? Can I help?' That's urban exploration for me, it's not to go anywhere and say 'I found the best places'. It's always to make some deep thoughts about the places. That's the way I see it and maybe for some other people is another thing" (personal interview, 27 June 2014).

As we saw in Nathan Wright's speech, one of the main critiques towards companies like 'Go2know' is the fact that they take advantage of an uncertain and decayed situation in the sites that may lead to think that abandonment is the ideal state of conservation to attract tourists. Wiebers does not see it in this way as he reckons that abandonment, and therefore his business, is only a transitional process due to the impossibility to maintain a fixed state of decay. Yet, the major threat for abandoned buildings is abandonment itself and therefore Wiebers considers that the purpose of a building is to be in use and make it part of the city's culture. He is confident that the money made by owners through photo-tours can be invested in developing the places in a democratic way. Indeed, the company has contributed with some reparations and providing new ideas about potential mixed uses that could include the creation of both private and public areas within the same complexes – even if it means that 'Go2know' would lose an abandoned spot to organize tours:

"I've seen lot of places where heritage can help to develop a whole region […] You see it in Hessen, former industrial landscapes developed into parks and people can walk there, everything is safe, and it helped to attract a lot of tourism to cities now. Wünsdorf [the former headquarters of the Soviet army in Berlin; (Fig. 2)] is really big and you could do a nice hotel for rich people and that's O.K. because they bring the money to develop the place. But you also have to keep areas that could be open for the public" (personal interview, 27 June 2014).

Fig. 2. Wünsdorf
Source: Ciarán Fahey, 2013. Reproduced with permission of the author

According to this, a point of common understanding between explorers and entrepreneurs is that the only fate for abandoned buildings cannot be to serve as glass-case museums where an artificial engagement with the place lasts as long as the tour is running. Heritage as a global field, and particularly abandoned buildings in Berlin, have to represent more than an occasional leisure activity where people should be asked to "re-work it, appropriate it and contest it [as a] part of the way identities are created and disputed" (Bender; as quoted in Harvey, 2001, p. 15). Unfortunately, such is not always the contemplated option in the mind of owners and urban developers, who have largely interpreted re-vitalization as accomplishing full and radical renovations of the material fabric so sites can be part of the real estate market.

Resisting gentrification

The demand of the Berlin market by private developers has increased since 2008 as the real state conditions were 'underpriced' – making it appealing as a profitable investment. This, together with the fact that 80% of Berlin's population lives in rented apartments, constitute the perfect breeding ground for gentrification processes (Apicella et al., 2013). Gentrification is a term that has been used mostly in Urban Studies since the mid-1960s and, although it was originally related to 'sustainable regeneration' or 'urban renaissance', it has not been until recent years that scholars started to point out its questionable consequences (Slater, 2013). Objectively defined, gentrification is the process by which working class neighbourhoods are rehabilitated by professional developers to transform an inner-city area into a higher class space in the reach of new residential or commercial uses (Lees et al., 2008). In principle, such phenomenon pursues to improve the city on the basis of a better socio-economic status, but gentrification also involves the transformation of the original character of the neighbourhood as well as a change in the population of land-users who can no longer afford to live in a now more attractive area due to the increase in the cost of living (Ahlfeldt, 2011).

Harvard Professor Michael Herzfeld (2010) is particularly critical towards gentrification, stating how the dominant neoliberal ideology uses terms such as 'improvement' or 'development' to play down the interests of local people. To reinforce his argument, Herzfeld puts in question how neoliberalism relies on objective and positivistic data as a post-modern circular dogma which leaves no place to contest a self-legitimated truth in gentrification research – and thus making it part of the problem. Day after day, more voices arise to make visible the way corporate developers influence political decisions. Consequently, it would be too naïve not to consider that gentrification is fundamentally a political process whose definition order may well be reversed from the one initially given – prioritizing yet class succession and displacement over any revitalization project (Levine, 2004; Bernt, 2012).

Following urban explorers' concerns, I have identified three types of gentrification that abandoned buildings are facing in Berlin nowadays. The first type responds to a building whose historical background is ignored and both its present and future are exclusively driven by speculation. In his post *'Garbáty's Abandoned Cigarette Factory'*, Ciarán Fahey regrets that a former cigar factory run by a Jewish family prosecuted by the Nazis had been white-washed to host luxurious condos (Fig. 3). This is only one example among many others in 'Abandoned Berlin' website, such as the refurbishing of the former *Soviet Military Administration Headquarters* in the district of Karlhorst, where nothing is left except private housing (Fig. 4); or the World War II *Oranienburg Airfield*, where most of the complex serves today as a supermarket chain's logistic centre (Fig. 5).

Fig. 3. Garbáty's Factory before renovation
Source: Ciarán Fahey, 2010. Reproduced with permission of the author

Fig. 4. Soviet Military Administration Headquarters in Karlhorst before renovation
Source: Ciarán Fahey, 2010. Reproduced with permission of the author

Fig. 5. Oranienburg Airfield before renovation
Source: Ciarán Fahey, 2012. Reproduced with permission of the author

One day, after one of our explorations together, Fahey and I saw a historical industrial complex that was being renovated. The works were about to finish and one of those monumental advertising posters was placed in the main entrance detailing the features of the new apartments that were being constructed. I asked Fahey if he could figure out the cost of each unit and he told me that some days ago he had checked on the website of a similar project where they were selling condos starting from €500,000. He said: "These guys are crazy, in Berlin there aren't too many people who can afford such prices. These are clearly addressed to external investors who basically offer the apartment for renting the day after they buy it" (personal fieldnotes, 6 July 2014).

In the meantime, many abandoned building's owners wait for their opportunity to speculate in the city. This brings a second type of gentrification which is directly related to abandonment: to let the buildings go completely ruined until the only logical destiny is their demolition. As Thilo Wiebers poses, many owners do not have any cultural concern about the property they own. For example, he refers to Jewish people who, after being sadly prosecuted, left their properties in Germany back in the 1940s. According to Wiebers, their legitimate heirs are now living in foreign countries and they have never visited the place they own and know nothing about it. This profile of an owner does not need the money in an urgent way while, at the same time, their lack of cultural awareness can only be understood as a generalized failure for a full collective memory and justice. So they patiently wait for the market to increase the price of the lot while the building deteriorates as times passes (personal interview, 27 June 2014).

I was aware of this situation after I got into the *Abandoned Building Alley*, located in the district of Stieglitz. What once was a polish wooden floor was no more than a concrete surface full of trash now; the metal structure in the roof was bending down; and I could hear drops of water filling the space with their

sound. Usually, when I am in an abandoned building, I try to imagine how it could be re-used in the future, but in this case, witnessing such level of decay, I could not help thinking that the bowling alley was beyond help (Fig. 6). If the owner of this complex had any intention to refurbish it, he was already too late. It is not a building with an outstanding historical background, but at the same time it is difficult to imagine that new stories will develop there in the future. On the contrary, if the owner was only waiting for total devastation in order to demolish the building and sell the empty area, I can tell that vandalism, the passing time and weather conditions were giving him a hand (personal fieldnotes, 8 June 2014).
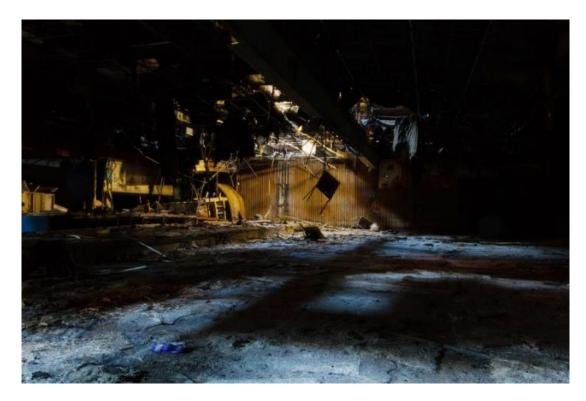

Fig. 6. Abandoned Building Alley
Source: Ciarán Fahey, 2014. Reproduced with permission of the author

Finally, certain abandoned buildings in Berlin are framed under a third type of gentrification that focuses in carrying out 'cool' and 'hip' activities inside. The issue here is that the alternative atmosphere is not an end in itself, and it basically serves the buildings to gain relevance as they become trendy, so the owners can decide whether to develop or sell the lot for residential or commercial uses once the price has increased. This is something that Thilo Wiebers pointed out during my interview when he admitted that some of the owners saw in photo-tours a marketing tool to promote the 'cool' side of dereliction in pictures that will then be on the internet – making it easier and more profitable as a potential entry into the market afterwards (personal interview, 27 June 2014). This is aligned with the notion of exploiting the image of Berlin as the 'capital of cool' for economic purposes (Balicka, 2013), although certain critical cases make clear the superficiality behind this idea.

The iconic *Tacheles* exemplifies the notion of abandoned building taken by hip culture which is finally swallowed by gentrification (Fig. 7). This case has been studied by Inga Untiks (2012), and it also touched Ciarán Fahey's nerve in his posts *"Tacheles: How Long is Now'* and *'How Long is Now? So Long, Tacheles"*. When I asked him about the situation he brilliantly summarized it:

"It's owned by a bank and they gave a 10-year lease to the squatters, or rather the artists. They turned it into an art centre, did their own thing for 10 years. It's a very short time for a bank because in the meantime the property prices go up and up. It's actually an investment since having artists there helps prices rise by making the area trendy and cool. What really pissed me off about the situation is the fact that that the city did nothing to save it. […] Tacheles also had the historical importance of being the first place to broadcast a live sporting event to the world, during the 1936 Olympics. For me Berlin did the wrong thing just by letting it close down. Now the bank will turn it in into a shopping center or some such: you will have H&M, Jack & Jones, and all these other shops moving in which have nothing to do with Berlin or its history" (personal interview, 25 April 2014).

Fig. 7. Tacheles
Source: Ciarán Fahey, 2010. Reproduced with permission of the author

The hopes in 'informal re-appropriation'

Being fixed on time and the permanent assumptions that it involves are the ordinary pillars in architecture. This provides an absolute meaning to buildings, which aims to be valuable and understandable for future generations. Therefore, our consciousness towards cities waits until this meaning is created, excluding from its framework those realities that are not clearly established and uncertainty is encountered. 'Informal re-appropriation' of the space belongs to this latter approach, where social participation plays a humble role in bringing back the life of buildings after their abandonment.

For Berlin's well-known squatter culture, it mainly consisted in an existential experience, 'because the derelict houses lacked modern amenities such as heating, running cold and warm water, electricity, all of which is today considered standard' (Heinemann, 2005, p. 18). This way of living initiated an actual urban paradigm where 'less was more', making evident that architecture without architects was not only possible

but recommendable, since its community value was based on a collective effort. This view contradicts the perception behind traditional approaches to urban heritage and adaptive re-use that seek to display buildings' old pomposity. It also moves from 'do-not-touch' to 'do-it-yourself', an approach to consider into Berlin's alternative imagery which allows to put the focus on the desirable fate for its abandoned buildings: to maintain the aesthetic and cultural value of dereliction as the city's uniqueness where locals are responsible for creating a sense of belonging by accomplishing minimal techniques of reparation.

Participatory approaches allow architecture to be 'released from its elite self-referential framework and steered towards a more inclusive condition open to change and mutation' (Lang, 2008: 218). This does not put value into what developers want to make but into what *is* already there, locating people at the core of the action rather than just placing them as another piece in the economic system. It is a fact that, due to their tricky spatial or maintenance conditions, abandoned buildings are ignored because they are currently not lucrative and they are simply waiting for the next economic project to turn them profitable (Doron, 2008). Yet, implementing a regimented architectural renovation that seeks to take full control of this transitional and uncertain situation may cause that these spaces 'progressively lose their charge of vitality and experimentation' (Lupo and Postiglione, 2009, p. 2) – what is aligned with the 'freedom' urban explorers find in abandoned buildings (Edensor, 2007).

In this context, informal re-appropriation rises against the excessive regulation within urban planning. It is a reaction towards official institutions driven by financial interests that "do not listen to people and do not try to include their needs and wishes on what is being projected" (Cirugeda, 2014, p. 21). Once more, here is the urban exploration's dilemma of constructing our own narrative for places or assuming the one which is given. Informal re-appropriation establishes a democratic framework between what took place and what will be taking place, a re-signification that "guarantees the involvement of people in the creation and construction of their spaces" (Cirugeda, 2014, p. 21). It then means self-recognition and self-experimentation, the promotion of collective design and the creation of a common and plural identity, reaching the claim for public space found in urban exploration.

Informal re-appropriation and its collaborative dimension contribute to strengthen the notion of 'heritage as experience' (Smith, 2006), where relevance lies in the embodiment associated to a building. In this sense, as a consequence of its dynamic population, Berlin's long tradition of participatory initiatives is an inherent cultural value which needs to be preserved. The potential creation of networks and the development of pedagogical activities play an essential role in this form of urban engagement. Through these experiences, the space becomes a social engine, "an asset for the community and with the community, which in itself creates community" (Lupo and Postiglione, 2009, p. 5). This social activism is constantly shaping abandoned buildings' significance while, paradoxically, such a permanent change becomes a fixed state. Yet, the memories attached to abandoned buildings are certainly important, but they are not necessarily more important than the experiences that emerge in the present and the progressive meaning that these acquire in time.

It is acknowledged that informal re-appropriations carried out by local actors usually tend to be temporary uses of the space (Colomb, 2012). However, the sum of ephemeral actions provides continuity and a well-defined alternative character to Berlin. Unlike traditional planning, which pursues an immediate finished product, the notion of temporary is considered as a "positive idea of improvisation and approximation in which the values and characteristics of lightness, transience, mobility and instability reflect a condition of freedom for experimentation and cultural cohabitation" (Lupo and Postiglione, 2009, p. 5). Recalling Bradley Garrett's (2011b) 'mutable qualities' in urban exploration, nothing is more exciting than going to a

place that you know will not look the same in the near future. As long as the 'trashy' spirit of the building is maintained, variations in the way of using it are welcomed so there is always a particular feeling when experiencing the site in the present moment and the infinite possibilities to imagine it in the future.

Berlin's population made possible a large number of participatory initiatives during the last decades. Eleonora Lupo and Gennaro Postiglione (2009) focus in three particular projects: the creation of Marie's Park after the demolition of a fire station in Prenzlauer Berg; Rosa Rose neighbourhood garden conceived in the surroundings of squatted apartments in Friedrichshain, and the alternative social housing village of Wagendorf Lohmuhle. Another successful case is the Künstlerhaus Bethatnien, a Prussian hospital abandoned in 1974 which was intended to be demolished. Only after strong protests, a series of informal actions were proposed and, since then, art has been exhibited in a building which shares historical architecture and subcultural additions. Another example is the Center for Art and Urbanistics located in the district of Moabit. This former train depot was re-appropriated in 2012 to accommodate artists and researchers and today it is a perfect example of a mixture of spaces. On one hand, there is a set of private studios and on the other there is a common exhibition gallery surrounded by a public park.

All these examples were carried out by preserving the decayed aesthetics of the sites, and consequently, they reinforce the transgressive character and flexibility found in urban exploration's approaches towards abandoned buildings. Informal re-appropriation usually involves the removal of walls, resulting in an increased permeability and fluidity that reflects the collective decision-making process (Heinemann, 2005; Sheridan, 2007). Dereliction remains but the process of decay is inverted, a strategy accomplished with a well-defined starting and a preferable uncertain end. Zach Fein defines the before-and-after qualities of this view, which aim to change the public perception towards abandoned buildings:

> *"The acceptance of decay, a perpetually evolving program, the aesthetic of the confines of that program, and a readdressing of the site of the decayed structure […] will ultimately be altered immensely by reoccupation of the space. However, through the understanding of the individual elements of such decay, it will not be forgotten, erased, or corrected as it often is during a typical renovation project"* (2011, pp. 29, 75).

Further characteristics in informal re-appropriation are those connected to sustainability, such as the possibility to re-use material and its low-cost implementation (Cirugeda, 2014). This is aligned and respectful to the existing spatial features and therefore is perceived as a set of minimal interventions that do not impose major transformations. It focuses the efforts towards what is strictly needed, a humble disposition to be implemented in the humility of modern ruins (Desrochers, 2004) and related to the 'poor but sexy' image of Berlin (Untiks, 2012). Without any intention to simulate the past, informal re-appropriation honours it through a process that incorporates abandoned buildings organically into the city. This may well avoid touristification and its subsequent commodification since buildings are not displayed as 'must-see' places. Informal re-appropriation rather seeks the practical implications of occupying the urban space, the everyday life utility where ultimately, true heritage is found (Edensor, 2002).

Conclusion

In this article it has been stated that urban exploration is a transgressive subculture from whose perspective the problems threatening abandoned buildings in Berlin can be studied. By avoiding overwhelming interventions and over-protective policies, it is precisely local population the responsible to put in practice informal re-appropriation initiatives, making evident that there is room for hope in Berlin's abandoned buildings against touristification, commodification and gentrification. Such participatory

approach turns out to be an ideal way to give life to derelict sites. Low-cost and minimal interventions guarantee that the decayed aesthetics of the building is preserved and therefore the alternative atmosphere of the city remains both practical and authentic. Therefore, informal re-appropriation generates a sense of community where the objective is not to transform an abandoned building into a museum or any other space for consumption. It rather creates public space for everyday activities, placing dynamism as Berlin's fixed state. This ultimately requires the use of abandoned buildings based on democratic consensus which, even if it is a more complex solution, can ensure people's welfare with an eye on what Berlin *really* is and not what neoliberal sectors pretend to make out of it.

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