BERLIN’S NEIGHBORHOODS IN THE TOURIST TRAP? LOCAL ROUTINES UNSETTLED BY NEW URBAN TOURISM

Stefan Brandt, Sybille Frank and Anna Laura Raschke

‘Berlin doesn’t love you’ is the slogan of many stickers that can be found on streetlights and distribution boxes in Berlin, countering Berlin’s official advertising pitch ‘Berlin loves you’ (see Figure 7.1). Some residents of Berlin’s inner-city neighborhoods are incensed by the ever-present noise from tourists right at their doorstep, while others laud the revenue brought to the city by a growing tourism industry.

In this chapter, we tackle the impact of formal and informal tourist accommodation on the perceived quality of living conditions in selected Berlin neighborhoods. We aim to make a case for new perspectives on the phenomenon of ‘New Urban Tourism’ (Maitland 2007) by discussing how routines of settling, dwelling and cohabitation are unsettled by this recent trend in urban tourism that targets residential neighborhoods. To this end, we draw on data collected in the research project ‘Neighborhoods in the tourist trap?’ based at Technische Universität Berlin and Technical University of Darmstadt. We primarily present findings based on six guided expert interviews conducted in 2018 with owners and managers of local accommodation facilities, as well as with representatives of regulatory bodies and neighborhood outreach programs established by local district administrations. They provide insights into recent changes in the tourism sector and the perceived impacts on local life in the neighborhoods. Quotes from the anonymized interviews are occasionally complemented with articles from local newspapers. We focus on two residential neighborhoods in Berlin: One locale for both ho(s)tel and private short-term guest lodgings rented out on the digital platform Airbnb, located in Berlin-Friedrichshain (LOR Boxhagener Platz), and one neighborhood with a low number of hotels but a high number of short-term rentals on Airbnb in Berlin-Neukölln (LOR Reuterkiez).
Changing Travels: New Urban Tourism and the Debate in Berlin

Urban tourism has brought at least two different types of tourists to the city: one is the organized sightseer, exhibiting the familiar touristic practices of visiting important historical or cultural sights, mostly staying in hotels and having an entire industry crafted around their needs (Fainstein and Judd 1999). As cities have profited economically from tourism, governance and marketing decisions have been continuously refined for and by the demands of the industry. To stay relevant and attractive to these tourists, cities have long established mechanisms to shape attractions for visual consumption via the tourist gaze (Urry 1990).

The other type of tourist, part of a relatively new and growing group, is what has been named ‘New Urban Tourists’ (Maitland 2007). These tourists aim to immerse themselves in their idea of the everyday lives of city dwellers. They look for socially and ethnically distinct neighborhoods with extended stocks of old buildings, public urban spaces and many small shops, bars, cafés and restaurants visited by local people. According to Maitland, for these New Urban Tourists, “the everyday and mundane activities of city residents take on significance as markers of the real, and off the beaten track areas, not planned for tourism” (Maitland 2010: 176). New Urban Tourists usually avoid hotel accommodation. They prefer to book private flats, hostels or small B&Bs located in residential neighborhoods, which is why Henning Füller and Boris Michel (2014) speak of ‘embedded tourism’. This second type of tourism has more notable effects on the residents than the first. Not only have their local lifeworlds become a destination and have been put on display. They are now also competing with tourists for spots in cafés, restaurants, parks, and, quite literally,
beds in residential neighborhoods that are now offered to short-term visitors as well as long-term renters. Johannes Novy thus summarizes that “[o]ne particular characteristic of the [recent] tourism boom in Berlin is the observable spatial expansion and dispersion of tourism” (Novy 2013: 232).

The preferred method to find accommodations for New Urban Tourists is the digital platform Airbnb due to its vast network of locally owned private rooms, flats or B&B accommodations in residential neighborhoods for temporary stays. Airbnb is a commercial provider that emphasizes local, social and individual dimensions of traveling by evolving the narrative of ‘living like a local’ in their marketing campaigns. The steeply increased asking rents in Berlin from a median just under €5/m² in 2005 (empirica 2020) to a median €10.75/m² in 2022 (empirica 2022) with peaks of €14/m² in inner-city residential areas in 2021 (Investitionsbank Berlin 2021: 73) have made renting out rooms or flats for short periods attractive not only for homeowners but also for tenants to alleviate the pressure of rent payments. With an increase of tourism arrivals to Berlin from 3.18 million in 1992 to 13.96 million in 2019 (Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg 2022a) and the numbers of residents growing from 3.47 million to 3.67 million in the same period (Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg 2022b), accommodation for both is in high demand, which has caused increased tension between locals and tourists.

The two neighborhoods investigated in this chapter, Boxhagener Platz and Reuterkiez, have been internationally portrayed in the media as being hip, cool, with a certain bohemian allure and thus worth visiting (Rogers 2015). While the tourists were initially embraced by the city of Berlin as a new revenue source for the financially struggling city, the political and media debate has recently shifted from broad praise toward a more nuanced problematization of tourist-induced transformations of neighborhoods. As residents started to complain about noise, pollution and the ever-present odor of urine left behind by partying visitors (Abel 2016), tourists’ routines of using urban space have been accused of being incompatible with residents’ routines in the media (Dienig 2014; Pohlers 2016). Moreover, New Urban Tourists’ demand for residential urban space has been criticized for creating housing shortages and rising rents in the city (Bartels 2010; Beikler et al. 2011).

In Friedrichshain, in the former Eastern part of once-divided Berlin where Boxhagener Platz is located, the housing policy of the socialist German Democratic Republic (1949–1990) concentrated mostly on the construction of large modern housing estates. Modernizations of older buildings mostly relied on individual DIY projects, which is why at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, parts of the housing stock were in a derelict state. During the 1990s and 2000s, Friedrichshain saw a period of major renovations. The district administration also actively started to try to attract tourists during that period. In this process, the area around Boxhagener Platz transformed rapidly into a place that is nowadays perceived as young and cosmopolitan (Frary 2018). It managed to keep an ‘authentic touch’ until the early 2010s but is now one of
Local Routines Unsettled by New Urban Tourism

Berlin’s inner-city areas with the highest rents (Investitionsbank Berlin 2020: 68), following several waves of gentrification and touristification (Dirksmeier 2015; Helbrecht 2016; Holm 2010).

Reuterkiez in Neukölln has been identified with the working class since the times of backyard workshops in the early 1900s. At the beginning of the 1970s, many inhabitants left Neukölln (located in West Berlin) in search for more modern housing, while immigrant workers and their families, mainly from Turkey or the Arab region, moved into the then outdated and dilapidated Wilhelminian buildings. After the Berlin Wall came down, public program in Reuterkiez aimed to improve living conditions in response to segregation and poverty. In recent years, former backyard workshops were converted to lofts and abandoned apartment houses were renovated. Compared to Boxhagener Platz, gentrification is a relatively new challenge though, “driven by an enormous internationalization of in-movers” (Holm 2013: 175).

Local Routines Contested

New Urban Tourists’ quest for gaining authentic experiences via ‘living like a local’ presumes there must be some knowledge of how locals actually live. Whether this knowledge is gained by communication (e.g., reading and talking) about local routines or by observing them, it is always the result of subjective perceptions and interpretations. In sociology, routines have been conceptualized as everyday performances that rely on tacit, pre-reflective and practical knowledge (Reckwitz 2002). Even though routines are performed unconsciously, and therefore seem to come naturally, they are structured habitually (Bourdieu 1987). Local routines can therefore be understood as a sum of socially formed and habitually incorporated schemes of perceiving, interpreting and judging that shape social and built space (Bourdieu 1991). These routines influence everyday life and cohabitation in neighborhoods in a twofold manner. First, they serve as performed practices by means of which locals establish place-related identities. Second, spatial routines are an expression of subjective perceptions and interpretations of spatial aspects of everyday life (Dörfler 2013). While local routines are unconsciously performed practices and the knowledge they are based on is not easily accessible for actors through reflection, routines tend to become accessible when certainties get contested, as that transforms tacit knowledge into tangible knowledge (Reckwitz 2002). These contestations are prevalent both in the media discourse on tourism and in our interview material.

New Urban Tourists consume residential neighborhoods as an eventful “spac[e] of diference, free from the bonds of home and work” to immerse themselves in (Edensor 2007: 199). This means that a new, at times transgressive, space is created alongside the “everyday lives and banal urban spaces” of residents (Edensor 2007: 201) that might clash with their mundane routines (Wittstock and Würmdobler 2015). While New Urban Tourists visit Berlin to take part in leisure opportunities, local residents complain about the tourist-specific noise
of trolleys being dragged over cobblestoned sidewalks, or about loud and often drunken partying in hallways at night (see Figure 7.2) (Pohlers 2015; Weber-Klüver 2011). Residents’ routines of using the neighborhood to work, rest and sleep thus seem to be challenged by a new group of temporary neighbors equipped with considerable economic power. One of our interviewees encapsulates this double-sidedness of New Urban Tourism as follows: “I complain about the tourists at times as well […]. But Berlin doesn’t make much […]. We therefore simply need the tourists” (Tourist accommodation provider, Boxhagener Platz, personal interview, 24 October 2018).

Challenged Routines of Settling

Our interviews with representatives from district administrations and local lodging establishments revealed that the most frequently mentioned transformation of neighborhood life that these agents connect with New Urban Tourism is the displacement of both residents and local small business owners with limited financial resources due to drastic rent increases. These displacements are seen to have effected a marked change in both the social fabric and the economic landscape of the sought-after residential neighborhood.

Displacement of Residents

Our interviews mirror a fear of displacement in manifold ways. A representative of the district administration in Friedrichshain recounts that “Airbnb moved quickly into this attractive area [Boxhagener Platz]. First with one house, now there are several. Of course we see a great danger that the neighborhood […] will
be pushed out by tourism” (personal interview, 1 November 2018). The same representative further reported that surveys among inhabitants of the Boxhagener Platz area had uncovered “that the rents are rising quickly, and those who still live in the flats, the former young ones, stay in their flats because they still have old contracts and they try to keep them as long as possible” (ibid.).

At Reuterkiez, the culprit identified by a tourist accommodation provider as responsible for the massive changes in the area is also Airbnb. “That is something that […] ruins all prices” (tourist accommodation provider, personal interview, 4 December 2018). The interviewee further explains:

A lot of my friends had to move out. They have their second child now, had to look for a new place and move to Charlottenburg [a staid inner-city residential neighborhood]. That would have been a no-go twenty years ago [due to the high rents in Charlottenburg]. Because it is cheaper there [these days].

( ibid.)

Regarding rising rents, our respondents are also concerned with the fact “that the welfare institutions on the lower floors are being displaced, and when […] someone moves out, prices are adjusted to the maximum to be rented out again” (Representative of the district administration, Reuterkiez, personal interview, 23 November 2018). A local journalist points to the paradoxical effects of advertising private residential apartments as holiday homes through Airbnb: “The platform thus destroys, at least indirectly, the very local scenes that it advertises to authenticly discover” (Worthmann 2015).

Displacement of Small Local Businesses

Apart from competing for living space and the housing market on increasingly unequal terms, inhabitants and tourists also compete for businesses in their neighborhood. Wherever local residents’ and tourists’ demands differ, an adaptation of local businesses to tourist needs may lead to frictions in the provision of basic supplies. For example, residents need hardware stores, craft businesses, flower shops and hairdressers that are of small or no importance to tourists. Combined with rising rents for commercial units, local small businesses may be forced out in favor of restaurants, cafés, bars and clubs that cater to both residents and tourists. This may change the look of neighborhoods and make everyday life for residents more difficult as they must travel farther to satisfy resident-centric demands.

At Reuterkiez, the problem of a decreasing number of local shops for basic supplies has been identified only recently, so regulatory measures are not available yet. Nevertheless, a representative of the district administration for Reuterkiez has expressed their desire for a diversified retail landscape with more than gastronomic facilities “that can afford the fourfold rent” (personal interview, 23 November 2018). Accordingly, one of our respondents in Reuterkiez who runs a
small local business told us that it is likely that his/her enterprise will be affected by the rising rents soon:

I myself am facing the decision this year for my business to go on or not. And it is not up to me. And it is not because of my business numbers. [...] This is a healthy business [...], but should the landlord really ask for the double rent, I am gone. And then again, there is one business less in Neukölln. And that is the development I am talking about: give middle and small businesses a chance to remain here, because it really [...] adds to the diversity of the neighborhood.

(Tourist accommodation provider, Reuterkiez, personal interview, 4 December 2018)

In Boxhagener Platz, that had established itself as tourism hotspot earlier than Reuterkiez (Grube 2018), the district government identified the displacement of local businesses as a phenomenon to be combated as early as in the 2010s, but, according to a representative of the district administration, support for local small businesses is still needed as “[i]n the end, it has to do with the rent when businesses close down” (personal interview, 1 November 2018). The representative claimed that it is therefore now the district’s aim “that the structure of the neighborhood remains intact, that one likes to live here because everything is close by and one doesn’t have to travel to the outskirts of Berlin to run errands” (ibid.). From the perspective of local business owners, this means “that the [...] plumber does not necessarily have to drive two hours from Brandenburg, but that the one that is already here can stay” (ibid.). Local shop owners’ ability to stay in their existing locations is important for the residents as well since they “do need the bakery, and not just the kiosk with the heated-up rolls” (ibid.).

Our interviews consistently indicated that not only the tenants but also local shop owners are threatened by displacement through rising rents in the inner-city neighborhoods we studied. Hence, they feel that their routines of inhabiting or serving a residential neighborhood are challenged. What usually follows are, as a local journalist comments “big chains with fast food or corporate fashion, because nobody else can afford the high rents” (Keller 2017). This development is regarded to undermine the sought-after (by the tourists) and highly valued (by the residents) “good mix between gastronomy, small interesting shops that cannot be found everywhere, [and] young people” (Representative of the district administration, Boxhagener Platz, personal interview, 1 November 2018).

Contested Routines of Dwelling

The dissonance between New Urban Tourism and residents’ patterns of living, working and sleeping was an oft-referenced issue in our interviews. A representative of the district administration for Boxhagener Platz stresses “that where many people sojourn, one should be considerate of the residents” (personal
Local Routines Unsettled by New Urban Tourism

Interview, 1 November 2018). What should be avoided are “such tendencies [...] as in Prenzlauer Berg [a popular inner-city district in the North-East of Berlin] where all restaurants had to close at 10 p.m. because of noise complaints, so that it has become a dormitory neighborhood” (ibid.). So higher noise levels led to restrictions imposed on a nightlife that many Berliners had also valued.

Similarly, according to a representative of the district administration, residents of the Reuterkiez area bemoan that “they cannot sleep or open the windows, because they feel disturbed by the noise. And that there are no limitations at night” (personal interview, 23 November 2018). This lament is, however, contested by a resident who praises the neighborhood for its vitality. In his/her point of view, people who live in or move to this neighborhood should not complain about its liveliness and popularity: “If I want to have silence, I have to move somewhere else”, s/he says (Tourist accommodation provider, Reuterkiez, personal interview, 4 December 2018). At the same time, s/he praises Reuterkiez, and Berlin’s neighborhood structure as such, for its village-like coziness:

People know me and my dog at my kiosk. I go in, the dog gets his treats right away, I can take my milk even if I don’t have any money on me and just pay the next day. [...] And that is what I am talking about, this makes this city, even if it is a big city and essentially anonymous, [...] you can choose a different way here, that you somewhat ally yourself with your neighbors.

(ibid.)

This mixture of anonymity and intimacy, of being a tourist hotspot, and a trusted local environment at the same time, is, at least for this resident, a major constituent of local routines that are, in his/her view, not so much challenged by tourists, but by new groups of residents moving in.

Another interviewee from Reuterkiez stresses the similarities between tourists and those particular groups of residents who may hold the pace of rising prices and the tourist-friendly remodeling of neighborhoods:

In the end it comes down to this picture: in the summer, you sit outside in a corner café, enjoy your coffee, watch the types of people go by and maybe look catty-corner, ah, I wanna go there. This would be the touristic perspective. If I see local atmosphere as a resident, I would probably also sit in these cafés and use it as well.

(Representative of the district administration, Reuterkiez, personal interview, 23 November 2018)

An interviewee from Boxhagener Platz also expresses the opinion that they get along well, those young, or not so young anymore [laughs] old residents, that live in the neighborhood, and all the new Berliners. But because
they all love the same things, like sitting outside in the sun and drinking coffee […] I think there is no problem here, more like: it grows together.

(Representative of the district administration, Boxhagener Platz, personal interview, 1 November 2018)

These statements illustrate a different outlook on the city where a divide does not run between tourists and permanent inhabitants. As a newspaper article aptly reports, “the issue is not about tourists versus residents per se. It is about certain tourists and residents—‘place’ consumers, so to speak—using the city differently than other residents, particularly those who sleep at night” (Braun 2010: 2).

Challenged Routines of Cohabitation

In order to further explore the new dividing lines within Boxhagener Platz and Reuterkiez as neighborhoods that are frequently visited by New Urban Tourists, it is instructive to look at how representatives of the district administration describe changes in the social fabric of their respective neighborhood. One interviewee from Boxhagener Platz emphasizes that “the neighborhood has always felt like a good mix of young and older people” (representative of district administration, personal interview, 1 November 2018). It is telling that the presence of all ages is accentuated here, while other characteristics such as a mix of social classes or ethnicities are not mentioned, given the extended period of gentrification the area has undergone.

In Reuterkiez, the situation is different. The neighborhood has only recently become popular with both Berliners and tourists for its desirable urban atmosphere. Here, age indeed is perceived as a dividing line. A representative of the district administration Reuterkiez explained:

The younger people are the ones that almost come automatically. But they are also pushed by social media, […] It has taken on a little bit of a life of its own in this group and has spread a positive image of Neukölln as a place to be for young people.

(personal interview, 23 November 2018)

The reported influx of young people is just one aspect of a complex unsettling of local routines of cohabitation though. Another routine that has been firmly challenged in Reuterkiez is the everyday interaction between different social groups. A tourist accommodation provider in Reuterkiez explained:

I think especially around Reuterplatz […] we have this melting pot of the most different people. The CDU [Christian Democrats] voter lives next to the punk, him in a partly squatted building […] It has remained a little bit [but] it is changing a little bit now unfortunately, this entire structure.

(personal interview, 4 December 2018)
The interviewee continues to describe this new social structure as follows:

I see more and more buildings that are dark at night […] during the week. During weekends […], the lights are on […]. I can conclude from that: ah, works somewhere else, comes home on the weekends. Has bought a flat or even rented one, if one can afford it.

(ibid.)

Even though these new locals are jobholders, they obviously do not move to Reuterkiez to make their living there, but because they can afford the rents and want to enjoy the famed local atmosphere in their leisure time.

The everyday interaction between different ethnic groups has also been unsettled. One interviewee recounts that Reuterkiez “was an insider tip nine years ago. It isn’t anymore” (Tourist accommodation provider, Reuterkiez, personal interview, 4 December 2018). S/he explicates that “indeed, many, many nationalities move here and it is still wonderfully mixing” (ibid.). But at the same time, there are many “definitely German families […]. Probably also some singles, but also young couples that move here now. There is nothing wrong with that, it just makes it a little less lively” (ibid.). This viewpoint is expanded upon by a representative of the district administration (Reuterkiez) who speaks of a “new mix”, meaning that

the family can [live] next to the Arab family, the […] autochthonous German next to the Arab family. You can already find that here, but there are also blocks with more condominiums and a certain clientele, that can afford them. I don’t even want to attribute that to ethnicity.

(personal interview, 23 November 2018)

While ethnic diversity still is noticeable, these statements indicate that neighborhood life is increasingly perceived as a mixing of urban dwellers of the same upper social class. Although the routinized practices of cohabitation of diverse groups of people have been challenged by the rising attention that New Urban Tourism and young groups of visitors have brought to these neighborhoods, remarkably enough their changing social and ethnic structure is not attributed to the tourists, but to specific groups of new locals moving in.

Conclusion

While “it has become increasingly popular [in Berlin] to look at tourists as some eleventh biblical plague […] and make them single-handedly responsible for unwanted changes the city’s more centrally located neighborhoods are currently experiencing” (Novy 2013: 228), our interviewees regard New Urban Tourists as a specific type of new, temporary locals. They put tourists in a similar category as those second-home or permanent residents who recently moved
to Boxhagener Platz and Reuterkiez because of the neighborhoods’ leisure-oriented consumption offers and enjoyable atmospheres. For our interviewees, these highly mobile groups do not only have in common that they are new to the neighborhood and therefore (temporary or permanent) ‘new locals’; but more importantly, the practices of these ‘new locals’ (e.g. accepting higher price ranges for dwelling and daily supplies, eating and drinking out, partying) are a challenge to the mundane lifeworlds and routines of settling, dwelling and cohabitation of those ‘old locals’ who live ordinary lives in the neighborhood, shaped by the bonds of home and work (Edensor 2007). Many ‘old locals’ simply do not have the economic means to protect themselves, as well as their reportedly ‘authentic’ neighborhoods, from this leisure-centric new wave of consumption-based urban capitalist restructuring.

As Verena Pfeiffer and Sophia Döbbeling (2006) pointed out, gentrification and touristification processes overlap in manifold ways, and changes in local trade and in the social structure of neighborhoods can be induced or enhanced by either of them (Gotham 2005). Under this premise, many Berliners view New Urban Tourists as drivers of neighborhood change. They are blamed for attracting people with similar leisure-based lifestyles and related businesses, and thus for rising rents and displacement. Commenting on tourism with smug disapproval is hence a continuation of longstanding conflicts in Berlin over accelerating gentrification, while the divide between those who belong, and those who do not, is widening.

Notes


2 Berlin is divided into so-called ‘Lebensweltlich orientierte Räume’ (lifeworld-oriented spaces, LOR) by the federal state government. These are small-scale areas for which data are collected.

3 Particularly in 2020, but also in shorter periods of 2021 and 2022, visitor numbers fell drastically because of travel restrictions and lockdowns to contain the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

References


Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg. (2022b) Bevölkerungsstand—Zeitreihen. Available at: https://download.statistik-berlin-brandenburg.de/f9096e7495a98683/6f13b0b05e6a/Bevoelkerungsstand_LangeReihe_2021_Berlin-Brandenburg.xlsx [Accessed 28 July 2022].


