

KOTTI & CO

Design Practices Between Care, Allyship, and the Fight for the Right to the City

Tashy Endres and Sandy Kaltenborn
in conversation



FIG. 1

The Gecekondu was erected on the southern part of Kottbusser Tor square by the tenants' association Kotti & Co in 2012 on public land. The structure, while technically illegal, is tolerated by the district of Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg.

The neighborhood and tenants' association Kotti & Co, founded in 2011, is shaped by its many members from migrant communities, and is considered the cradle of a new movement called "Stadt von unten" [city from below], which centers on tenants' rights. Kotti & Co's activist practice derives from the idea of caring for the urban environment and defending the right to housing for the inhabitants at Kottbusser Tor square (affectionately called "Kotti" by locals), in Berlin's Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg district, who often face multiple kinds of marginalization simultaneously. Today, Kotti & Co plays an important role in urban policy discourse and the struggle for the socially minded and democratic provisioning of housing and against displacement and racism in the city. Tashy Endres (an active member of Kotti & Co from 2012 to 2017) and Sandy Kaltenborn (cofounder of Kotti & Co) reflect on twelve years of activism and on the group's protest strategies from a political, spatial, and design point of view. They also discuss the emancipatory potential of the underlying processes driving the formation of collectives and knowledge, while also critically addressing the role of institutions and professions in the project of comprehensive social transformation.

SAVDY KALTENBORN:

If we look back on the history and political achievements of Kotti & Co from today's vantage point, what do you feel were the crucial successes?

TASHY ENDRES:

Our successes become apparent if we remember what the situation was like when we started: 12 years ago, rents started to rise dramatically, and when it came to social housing, the rent for over 50 percent of apartments was above the Berlin rent index. Global capital was increasingly flowing into the German real estate market in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, massively intensifying speculative investments in housing in the city. Many people with low incomes were forced to cut back on basics such as food, health, or clothing to pay the skyrocketing rents. However, among the broader general public, there was virtually no debate about rent increases, social housing, or the right to the city. Even tenant associations told us there was nothing that could be done on the question of social housing. Today, it is safe to say that we have achieved just about everything we set out to do: The Employment Office now carries the cost of real rents for unemployed people living in social housing projects, rent increases in social housing throughout Berlin have been stopped (2015), and ownership of the social housing stock at Kottbusser Tor has been once again municipalized (2021). That has saved an awful lot of people from losing their homes. On the back of previous struggles and the experiences gained, we provided a lot of inspiration for the new movement on urban policymaking. Many of our threads were then woven further: As early as 2016, for example, we led a

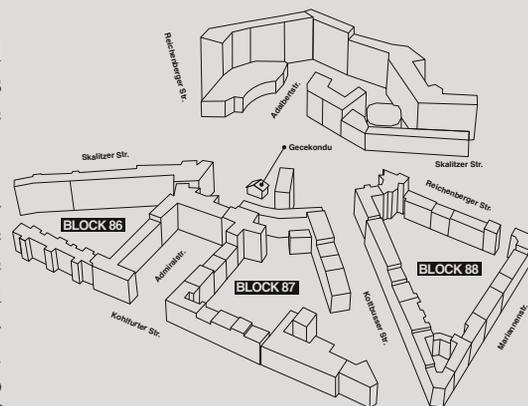


FIG. 2

1970s social housing blocks around Kottbusser Tor square

The majority of the buildings south of Kottbusser Tor was privatized when the city's largest housing agency GSW was sold off to an international consortium (made up of Goldman Sachs's Whitehall Street investment fund and Cerberus Capital Management) in 2004. The housing stock was acquired by Deutsche Wohnen SE in 2013 and finally re-municipalized in 2021.

campaign for the constitutionally permissible socialization of Deutsche Wohnen, a publicly traded corporation which was also the owner of the lion's share of the apartments at Kottbusser Tor. Derided back then, the question was put to the vote in a State referendum I co-initiated as the logical next step after Kotti & Co, "Deutsche Wohnen & Co enteignen" [Expropriate Deutsche Wohnen & Co], five years later—and the result was emphatic: In 2021, a majority of voters in Berlin decided in favor of expropriating private, profit-oriented housing companies of all housing stock exceeding 3,000 units to guarantee the availability of housing. It was not least the broad politicization of the topic, reaching deep into mainstream society, which ensured that Berlin's government, known as the Senate, transferred the social housing units on the southern end of Kottbusser Tor back into municipal ownership shortly before the referendum was to be held. The tables have turned; look who's smiling now.

SAVDY KALTENBORN:

From the outset, we were forced to conceptualize our protest on a large scale, reaching over and above Kotti. The actual site-specific problems persuaded us to interrogate the political system of providing social housing in Germany. The conference called "Nichts läuft hier richtig" [Nothing's going right here], which we hosted in 2012 together with housing policy experts from Berlin's State parliament, helped us get a better understanding of how the underlying structure of social housing in Germany is anything but socially sustainable. It is in fact a system of "interim social use," with private investors and housing construction companies benefiting from government subsidies and tax breaks to build apartments

that they can rent out at a high price once the mandatory period of rent control, known as social obligation, has expired. Our core topics and demands—the return of social housing to municipal ownership, the permanent continuation of various forms of rent control for units built by private investors, the democratization of State-owned housing agencies, and later on the issue of expropriation—were therefore only the logical consequence of what had already taken place on the ground at Kotti in an exaggerated manner in terms of problems and needs. If we talk about successes, I also find it important to mention how, in our case, all manner of different knowledge spaces and practices came together at a very early date and went on to generate a creative protest design with its multifaceted tactics and strategies that went hand in hand with the site-specific conditions. Back then, there was strong interaction and cohesion between individual tenants who had lived here for generations, sometimes spread across different floors and often with a migration history dating back to the so-called “Gastarbeiter” [guest workers] period when Germany’s booming postwar economy was heavily dependent on recruiting millions of foreign workers. As we were holding our first Kotti & Co assembly at Café Südblock on the southern end of the square, with our different bodies marked by so many different biographies and the corresponding notions of what it means to be in the world, it became clear that we were not hosting a traditional activist get-together. From the beginning, we were forced to be mindful of finding a language that had to be mediatorial, tentative, and inclusive. We created a space between ourselves that had us relating to one another with a curiosity and a mutually productive dependency that went beyond the issue of rents. Alongside that core topic, talks focused a lot on experiences of migration, racism, and other, more worldly and everyday matters. The shared (hi)stories about the Berlin squatters’ movement of the 1980s from a perspective of migration gave us new viewpoints and an “informal knowledge” about the right to the city. We then gradually integrated this into our communicative outreach and distilled it into political language.

TASHY ENDREŞ:

I only joined Kotti & Co in 2012, during the squatting of Kottbusser Tor. How did you effectively structure the organization in the first few months as a tenants’ organization?

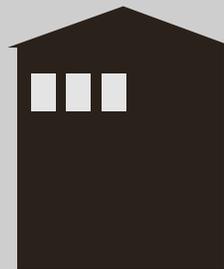
SAVDY KALTENBORN:

In our first year, we began with small public protests and occasional events, collected signatures, distributed flyers, and established links with political parties. We met once a week and enjoyed backyard parties together. All these activities were a source of invaluable experience as to how we functioned to-

FIG. 3

In collaboration with political, scientific, and tenancy law experts, Kotti & Co was able to show, based on a building on Kohlfurter Straße, that the social housing projects have already been amortized multiple times over. Profits, however, have been privatized.

BILANZ – WIE OFT WURDE DAS HAUS VON WEM AN WEN NACH 35 JAHREN BEZAHLT:



DAS BEISPIELHAUS KOSTETE
CA. 2 MIO EURO IM BAU (1977)
85% FREMDKAPITAL
UND 15% EIGENKAPITAL
KOSTENMIETE: 7,60 EURO *

* Die durchschnittliche Kostenmiete im sozialen Wohnungsbau liegt bei 13,- Euro. Entsprechend höher sind dann die Fördersummen und die Bankengewinne.



DIE GEWINNER:



WIR
WOLLEN
UNSERE
HÄUSER
ZURÜCK

1. ENTEIGNEN 2. (RE-)KOMMUNALISIEREN

FIG. 4

In the run-up to the 2016 Berlin State election, Kotti & Co initiated a small campaign aimed at re-municipalizing the social housing blocks around Kottbusser Tor. The campaign subsided soon after the election, but was taken up by activists two years later and overwhelmingly approved by voters in a 2021 statewide referendum called Deutsche Wohnen & Co enteignen (Expropriate Deutsche Wohnen & Co).

gether as a group. Nevertheless, we were soon forced to recognize that nothing had moved substantially. It was the period of worldwide squatting of public spaces to create political pressure from the bottom up and with broad social backing: There was Tahrir Square in Cairo, the Movimiento 15-M in Spain, Occupy Wall Street, etc. On Whitsunday weekend in 2012, we hosted a street party directly on Kotti’s southern plaza. Under the cover of the party, we squatted the square. We placed a platform made of stacked freight pallets on the floor, put a few benches and chairs around it, gathered there at 6 p.m., and said: “We’ll stay here as long as it takes to solve the problem.” This laid the groundwork for the space we called Gecekondu, which, in Turkish, refers to an informal settlement and literally means “built overnight.” A structure erected between dusk and dawn on public land was protected under Ottoman law.

TASHY ENDREŞ:

When I joined you on the day of the sit-in, I was immediately won over by the fact that it was not a “traditional” protest. The public square was not occupied by and for a closed group. It was not some fear-inspiring place but an open space where people cared for one another. A samovar stood in the middle, and everyone was invited to have a cup of tea and chat. The neighborhood gathered, a perfect representation of its social stratification. I felt that the promise of a new kind of community was in the air; not one based on us all being the same, but one that took its roots in the fact that we are all different and that we can turn that difference into our strength. This act of squatting created a space for participation and belonging on many different levels: You belonged if you prepared tea, if you gave a concert, if you took on a day shift or a night shift in the Gecekondu, if you came along to the rally. But you also belonged by simply gaining the confidence to drop by with complicated letters and helping one another work out the actual meaning behind the German legalese. Belonging, now that is something we do not frequently offer one another in a city ... you don’t become a part of this neighborhood and belong to it by virtue of a passport or a postal address; you belong by accepting it, respectfully listening to others, accepting and extending invitations, giving and receiving care. For all the conflicts that arose, that perspective of mutual care was always at the center of our protest. With the Gecekondu practice, knowledge and people who are often marginalized in Germany symbolically and literally seized the space they were entitled to, alongside their right to the city. The Turkish concept was key, but it was not a particular right for only a few, as we all joined up to create the Gecekondu—so, on the contrary, it actually demonstrated in its own way: “We are all here to stay!”

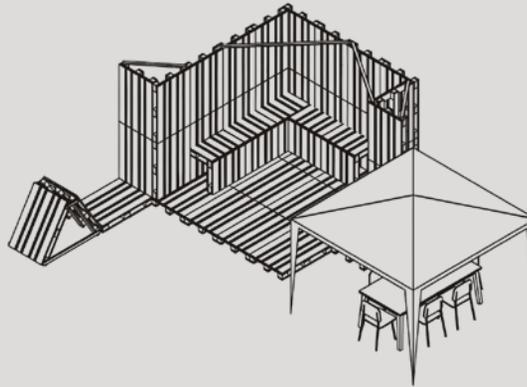
FIG. 5
The initial sit-in in 2012

In their speech at the Gecekondu, founding members Jale Öztekin and Fatma Cakmak outline Kotti & Co's demands: a rent freeze for social housing, covering of real rents in social housing units by the Employment Office, a conference focusing on long-term solutions to the social housing sector's problems, and a recomunalization of the once privatized buildings around Kottbusser Tor.



SANDY KALTENBORN:

With this message as its core tenet, the squatting of the square was essentially a political act. But alongside the political protest we sought to express through the sit-in, everyone had to work to make certain the protest functioned and persisted. Making tea, disposing of garbage, cleaning, painting posters, hanging up banners, transporting things, etc. There was always something that needed to be done and which in the traditional sense was more a matter of reproduction work than protest activities. From the very outset, we emphasized that every activity was of equal importance. The everyday world was therefore at home in our protest, in the sit-in, and thus in our understanding of politics. The protest was a collective violation of the rules, a transgression. In a sense, everyone who gathered there became an ally. This strengthened the feeling of solidarity and, moreover, the leap out of everyday life somehow rearranged the logics of spacetime. It was a lot of work, but escaping our work and everyday stress was also very fruitful. The passing of time was different in this public space unburdened by any prior format. Because everyone had different ideas about how all the different things should look, and with everyone offering to give a hand, this spirit got translated into a space with an inviting feeling. This was neither purely activist nor academic knowledge, but instead a mixture in which a lot of informal, migrant, and also subaltern knowledge could be articulated. And I believe that this basic arrangement gave rise to what we once dubbed “multilayer protest,” meaning different practices, activities and organizing strategies with which, in subsequent years, we attempted to increase the pressure on politicians on all conceivable levels and in different areas of society.



TASHLY ENDREŞ:

I think it is important to go into some of the details about the role of the Gecekondu, as it almost always formed the spatial point of origin for all these processes of (self-)organizing: It was here that we came together as a neighborhood; it was here that we organized all sorts of things, from Halay dances against high rents and symphony concerts to Hip Hop battles; it was here that our 50 rallies started and ended; it was here that we welcomed innumerable activist groups from Berlin and all over the world with whom we had established links; and it was here that we offered free advice on tenancy laws and social welfare rights for the neighbors. That is how we were always up to date on the latest strategies by landlords and the Employment Office. Starting out from the Gecekondu, we organized neighborhood campaigns on the horrendous fixed costs and maintenance problems of apartment buildings to overcome the mutually-isolating logic of tenancy laws. Thanks to our community organizing practices, we were able to establish a network of contact persons in the various buildings. At a smaller level, this assumption of responsibility for the buildings preempted the democratic self-administration structures on which the return of buildings to municipal ownership hinged—and for which we campaigned on a more macroscopic level devising specific models based on participatory studies in the neighborhood. With these, as well as with our advisory work on tenancy laws and on social welfare rights, we were able to compile exact data on the real rent burden. This data allowed us to successfully campaign for the area around Kotti to be placed under statutory milieu protection by district authorities, a designation entailing

FIG. 6
The Gecekondu's base structure made from shipping pallets: It extended the neighborhood's living rooms into the streets and acted as a base camp for a 24/7 protest held in shifts. It also was a place for neighbors to socialize, have tea, and help with expanding the structure.

high hurdles for changing the size, amenities, and ownership models of housing units so as to protect the existing tenants and to limit speculative real estate transactions. The data also applied pressure on the Senate Department of Social Services and the Employment Office to take on the real rents for social housing. Years after having arranged the conference on social housing held at the Berlin State parliament, we were invited to take part in a Senate Committee of Experts on reforming social housing. And even if the



FIG. 7
Second extension: The Gecekondu is enlarged with a makeshift container and reclaimed windows, enabling a continuation of the protest during the sit-in's first winter.

brief for that Senate Committee pretty much echoed our description of the problems formulated long before, it was clear to us that the stitched-up proposals it put forward were not solutions. For that reason, we returned to Kotti and used the data from the Committee as background information for the 2015 State referendum on rent caps, for which we joined up with a broad alliance of tenants' associations to draft a law on the provisioning of social housing in Berlin. This pressure then led to a law capping rent increases for all social housing in Berlin, and steps to democratize the state-owned housing associations (e.g., by strengthening the tenants' councils and creating a public-law institution for housing supply, called Wohnraumversorgung Berlin or WVB). At the same time, we cooperated with numerous cultural institutions in the neighborhood, across Berlin, and internationally, and did an incredible amount of public relations work to influence the discourse around social housing, the right to the city, and against racism and gentrification. It was both necessary and fascinating to organize politically with people on all these levels—and sometimes well beyond the point



FIG. 8
The Gecekondu's interior hosts a multitude of formal and informal gatherings, events, and parties, as well as free counseling on tenancy and social welfare rights.

of exhaustion for each and every one of us. From time to time, we had to take a break; and, chatting with neighbors over a cup of tea in the Gecekondu, we were reminded exactly why all of this was worth doing.

SANDY KALTENBORN:

How do you reflect on the Gecekondu and the processes of spatial production from an architectural perspective?

TASHLY ENDRÉS:

What seems to me to be most worthy of emphasis is that it was our collective use which shaped the Gecekondu, and that is an important part of why it became this kind of engine of belonging. For the day on which we occupied the square, Stefan Endewardt, an architect and friend of ours, had designed a simple and unfinished structure made of freight pallets: a podium with two walls and two benches. It constituted an infrastructure, reduced to its load-bearing functions, open and unfinished, so that the neighbors could take it up and inscribe their needs, ideas, and acts of care into it. To keep us from getting wet, someone set up a huge parasol bearing the logo of Schultheiss, a Berlin brewery; because we needed more space, someone placed a couple of tents alongside it; because we wanted to serve tea, someone put up a cable running from the print shop through the tree to us so we could power the samovar and some fairy lights; and because people wanted to proudly show their neighbors how much the press reported on us, soon an entire wall was covered with newspaper clippings. Some activities were well coordinated in advance, others just followed the principle that, “if you want to do something, do it; and if you want to build something, build it.” With each new day, the Gecekondu looked a little different. It could morph from a public stage for passionate speeches to an intimate living room for vulnerable chats between people who, until moments earlier, had been strangers. It was a design shaped by all of us and, in that sense, anarcho-democratic architecture. At the same time, it demonstrated very publicly what was at stake: our precious coexistence. That was more powerful and symbolic than any political speech. And it clearly demonstrated: We are not going to wait until you act, we're taking things into our own hands!

SANDY KALTENBORN:

When the Gecekondu was converted for the approaching winter, the building—and with it the established processes—changed once again. How?

TASHLY ENDRÉS:

In the summer, the Gecekondu with its two walls was an open structure, which made it easy for people to sit down and become part of the group. At some point, it simply got too cold to sit outdoors and we needed to convert things in a major way. A single container was

FIG. 9

Third extension: In line with the Gecekondu's beginnings as an open structure, the roof is expanded to reach out above the sidewalk. Additionally, a new facade consisting of reclaimed balcony doors is installed.



provisionally placed next to the Gecekondu. Various design ideas were floated and because I did not want to stymie those efforts, I initially kept silent about my being an architect. I had become part of the core group, but not because of my architectural background. When materializing the ideas proved to be more difficult, at some point I drafted a design proposal for how we could integrate the container and close the Gecekondu using a load-bearing structure and a facade made of recycled windows, while keeping it open and inviting. At first, everyone welcomed the proposal and put a lot of energy into carrying out the plan. But one week later, when those of us in the core group stood in the new Gecekondu, some were disappointed that we were only really able to heat the container but not the greenhouse-like structure made of the reused windows. It became clear that the classical media of the architectural field—floor plans, collages and discussions—had not sufficed to enable us to collectively understand the future space. As a group, we needed a 1:1-scale experience to develop the next steps in the design process. That is something that tends not to happen in most “participatory” planning processes, but it was precisely the precondition for us managing to balance our differences in the way we approach space. All of that also confronted me with my own architectural presumptions: I had previously



FIG. 10

The Gecekondu is open again for celebrations after its third extension, hosting festivities such as Iftar (daily fast breaking) during the month of Ramadan.

worked for Lacaton & Vassal in Paris and had adopted their approach of creating large, greenhouse-like transparent volumes that can be opened and which enclose smaller, heat-insulated units. However, other people in the core group wanted more of a regular house, a unified space that can be heated like a living room. Ahmet Tuncer, who is also a member of the core group and had a lot of experience in interior construction to share from working on many different construction sites, suggested insulating everything. And as a result, a large part of the transparent skin of the building gave way to 30 centimeters of Styrofoam. Knowledge from academia and knowledge from the construction world do not often meet as equals when it comes to design issues. And this productive and exciting interaction gave rise to quite a unique building: The Gecekondu is not the easily-cleaned, anonymous multipurpose hall of tolerance in which anyone can do as they like as long as they don't leave a trace and do not constrain the options of the other users. Instead, the Gecekondu is an expression of relationships—of negotiations, conflict, different forms of knowledge, patience, of middle grounds overlapping each other.

SAVDY KALTENBORN:

How has that influenced your self-perception as an architect?

TASHLY EMDRES:

This real-world experience became one of the starting points for my research and teaching on educational approaches for future architects that are critical of discrimination, thereby fundamentally rethinking architecture. We cannot erase or reverse power relationships like racism or gendered and classist divisions that assign us different places in society simply by acting differently on a small scale. They are inscribed into property relations, building codes, and planning processes, but also into our biographies, our bodies, our (aesthetic) ideas, ways of behaving, or into what we would perhaps naively term “intuition”—and impact the way space is produced and used on all levels.

If they want to be able to contribute to material changes in these power dynamics, architects in particular, as part of the dominant groups in society, first have to unlearn a massive amount of things they have been brought up to perceive as “normal” or have learned to regard as the “norm” in their architecture studies. The construction process surrounding the Gecekondu showed me once again that often, unlearning the professional role we are trained to play in academia is necessary for architects to “participate” in construction processes that shift the real power divide in terms of both method and outcome. These processes of (un)learning are essential for an empowered architectural practice that is critical of discrimination. And they turn the question of participation on its head. Perhaps, Sherry Arnstein’s famous Ladder of Citizen Participation works the other way around: Could architects use it to climb down from their ivory tower of purported expertise and learn to participate in the political organizing processes of their neighbors? I am curious about your view on this in relation to issues of the visual design and communication strategies of Kotti & Co, both areas where you played a central role.

SAVDY KALTENBORN:

Let me begin with a small example: One of the first visual messages we put out was my adaptation of Milton Glaser’s “I ♥ NY” to read “I ♥ Kotti,” a small 10 by 10 centimeters sticker. This formally low-threshold declaration of love should be read against the backdrop of the prevailing negative image of Kottbusser Tor nurtured by the media back then: Suddenly, a marginalized, under-represented, and structurally poor neighborhood was professing its love of a place that, mere moments ago, had been read as an unsafe predicament for the city. This speech act constituted the neighborhood as a group for the first time and rendered it publicly visible. The “tourism postcard” with its charming photos of Kotti and the words “Greetings from Kottbusser Tor” pursued a similar

FIG. 11

“I ♥ Kotti,” adhesive label, 98 × 98 mm

This adaptation of Milton Glaser’s “I ♥ NY” was produced and distributed more than 200,000 times in the early years of the protest.

**FIG. 12**

Postcard, Kotti & Co

communication strategy: It is not the Brandenburg Gate or the Berlin Palace that are favorably coded on these postcards, but instead this highly complex urban space with all its social and political ruptures. And only at second sight, in a much smaller font, could you read the message “stop soaring rents.” This was quite different from how social struggles usually communicate and are talked about, with the opposition, the struggle, and the demands taking center stage. The sticker was later accompanied by a banner with the same formal language, with the difference that now instead of “I” there was a “We”. The protests gathered thousands of participants with “I ♥ Kotti” stickers on their jackets marching behind a big “We ♥ Kotti” banner. It was, if you will, my attempt to negotiate the relationship between the individual and the political collective on the small scale of a communication design layout. The price you pay for being part of a political collective is often the latent subjugation of the individual to the collective’s norms—which was exactly what we didn’t want to happen. Our constant key issues were therefore: How can an emancipatory meta-narrative be constructed for an urban society that is diverse, but ultimately very fragmented? Irrespective of the formal language and media format, how do you always communicate in an inclusive, poetic, and open manner without papering over the differences? In other words, how do you design something that respects diversity and does not create new forms of exclusion through aesthetic distinction? That is why the design ran analogously to the open, fragmentary aspect of the Gecekondu and our group in general.

TASHLY EMDRES:

To what extent did the close interaction with the people at Kotti & Co influence your professionally trained methods and also how you perceive your practice as a communication designer?

SAVDY KALTENBORN:

That can be easily visualized using a different example: At first, I gave the posters and leaflets for the more than 50 noise protests a colorful, joyful, and pugnacious touch. Yet, it quickly became clear that many of the users from our neighborhood, whose everyday reality receives only scarce representation in the media, mostly gazed at photos of the prior protests shown on the flyers. Along the lines of: “Look—I took part!” This observation inspired me to redesign the back of the protest announcements as a kind of family album. Had I not been to the Gecekondu daily, I would never have noticed or gotten the idea. From an outside perspective, the social complexity and function of this “photo album” is hardly

**FIG. 13**

Kotti & Co has organized more than 50 rallies, most of which had the Gecekondu as their starting and ending point. Neighbors often brought pots, wooden spoons, and whistles to noisily manifest their protest.

FIG. 14

Housing projects south of Kottbusser Tor

The mural was created in 2012 in collaboration with the Argentine group Pirqas al Sur and teenagers from the neighborhood.



FIG. 15

Kotti-Info: Informational newsletter in German and Turkish covering topics such as tenancy rights, organizing strategies, and assistance programs, alongside everyday events around Kottbusser Tor. Published twice a year, it is distributed free of charge to 2,000 households in the neighborhood.

legible. On the pictures, you simply see some people at a rally. I consider this a basic problem in the reception of designed artifacts: The context, conditions of production, and social uses are unintelligible. But in my opinion, that is precisely where the potential of their design becomes clear, in particular if you have a socio-political objective. Media are, after all, far more than simple carriers of information. The “Gecekondu experimental method” poses fundamental questions as to what defines design professions, be it design proper or architecture. An inaccurate grasp of the profession can constrict the practice. I was less interested in what I thought to be well designed or even “beautiful” in professional terms, and more in how to design amidst the heterogeneous social framework. And if you follow this train of thought to its logical end, you will find that the traditional professional understanding of what constitutes design and suitable media for conveying meaning rest on a very reduced notion of communication. For example, looking back I would say our tea kettle, the samovar, was our strongest social medium. The way I see things, the fact that we placed it where we did can be read as applied communication design.

TASHY ENDREŞ:

To conclude, I would find it interesting to reflect together on what actually happens with the Gecekondu and our political praxis when they become the subject of an architecture publication, a project, or an exhibition. What is the relationship between socio-political organizing and the world of culture and academia?

SAVDY KALTENBORN:

Over the past 12 years we have often had this kind of experience where we collaborated with institutions whose knowledge was located in academia and who were not directly part of our political struggle. We did so to get our political demands out into as many parts of society as possible. This also amounts to a transfer of cultural, social, and political knowledge or capital toward other scenes, other contexts. I therefore think that you need to be clear from the outset that these scenes and their related institutions have an intrinsic logic and goals that differ from the logic of protest. For us it was a matter of gaining more power in favor of direct political change while the other side focused on conveying knowledge and fostering discourse. Now that may seem trivial. But you can construe the whole thing as transactional, meaning the transfer of protest knowledge, street wisdom, and cultural capital into the institutions, and, in return, visibility and representation. It usually worked well when the institutions also supported things that could not

neatly be absorbed in the projects. In other words: When they began to selflessly redistribute resources. It seems key to me that you repeatedly revisit the different origins and interests of the two sides and negotiate them transparently. Even if that is more easily said than done.

TASHY ENDREŞ:

In addition to these different points of departure and interests to which you refer, there are also different senses of urgency and temporal rationales: For us it was about surviving as a neighborhood and changing the embedded material and structural power relationships. We said that we would stay until our rents were lowered and the problems of social housing were solved. Institutions tend not to have that commitment, and often operate in a project-based logic of switching from one topic to another in a tightly scheduled attention economy. What if an institution said they would now dedicate themselves to the right to the city, to antiracism, or to climate justice for the next 10 or 20 years? In any case, institutions must be measured up against whether they depict our praxis and knowledge as interesting ends in themselves, as an aesthetic surface, or worse, as social exoticism—or in a way that makes them allies to a social project of transformation. This includes the issue of whom the institutions make the knowledge produced by social movements available to. Often it is commodified in the outfit’s operating logic and placed in formats that are socially very exclusive. Be it through the language and the way it addresses certain groups, a required level of formal education, or access fees ... We are, through this conversation for example, also part of that: Because we already possess a lot of cultural capital, we are able to translate our experiences at Kotti & Co into relatively inaccessible language and research or publication projects, from which we extract even more cultural capital, intentionally or not—that is something that most of our fellow activists at Kotti cannot do.

SAVDY KALTENBORN:

Yes, the problem remains that the knowledge only structurally flows in one direction—and the formatting of the project can undermine any more sustained allyship with social movements. As you said, the right to the city was not some project hypothesis that we sought to explore in abstract terms, but boiled down to the question whether our neighbors would be forced out of their homes or not, whether the mailboxes would bear the same names three years down the line, whether the poor people would retain their right to the city center, period. From my viewpoint, it is exciting and interesting that many of these societal policy issues that progressive institutions

explore in abstract terms at times personally affect their very own staff. With all the collaborations that we have had through the years with cultural institutions, universities, theaters, etc., the most interesting personal conversations with project managers were those that did not focus on the particular project’s products. Not because the projects themselves were boring, not at all, but because a desire for authentic allyship and bonding in achieving socio-political outcomes emerged in the personal interaction, while the conditions of production only allowed for limited changes to the boundary lines of the institutional setting. A possible step in the right direction might be to pay more attention to this dynamic and turn it into a launch pad for future collaborations.

TASHY ENDREŞ:

The question that we—and many institutions—are now facing is how institutions can (un)learn structural power relationships and what a transformative understanding of “professionalism” could look like?

SAVDY KALTENBORN:

I believe that with the Gecekondu, Kotti & Co has shown how open-ended experiments must be designed if they want to tackle issues affecting society and democracy—that is what social protests are at heart. The issues of design we have sketched here, of communication, of language, of the appropriate media and distribution strategies—including the spaces and contexts in which they are received—are all key. And only to a very limited extent can we base this practice on the traditional canon of our professions, even if we label it as “social design.” To this end, we need at least two things: First, as you said, to practically unlearn things and, second, to immerse ourselves in socio-political debates. And by that, I mean insert ourselves into the conflict, take a side, put our own authorship into context, and, to a certain degree, make ourselves productively dependent on others.