

Dan Borden on Berlin's ever-changing urbanscape

Black hole

There's a black hole in the middle of the city. It's down at the Kreuzberg end of Friedrichstraße, past the chichi malls in the heart of a neighborhood you've probably never noticed. The neighbors – new, glitzy art institutions and forlorn social housing – stare at each other across the void, all perilously close to getting sucked in. It's 20,000 m² of urban emptiness, with a gang of suitors jostling for control. Until last year, some had a dream: it could be home to Berlin's one and only 'missing *Kunsthalle*', a building dedicated to Contemporary Art for All. But fate, as dictated by our senators, seems to have decided otherwise, pointing the direction for the next chapter of Berlin's urban development. Unless...?

Last May, Berlin's wholesale flower market, the Großblumenmarkt, moved to a new building in Moabit. It left behind its longtime home, a sprawling 1960s warehouse in the sort of no man's land so common to Berlin. Around it lies one of the city's poorest neighborhoods, full of the immigrant welfare families that populate Thilo Sarrazin's populist rants. But dotted among the drab housing are new galleries and some of the city's richest museums. Called "südliche Friedrichstadt", it's a neighborhood of incompatible Berlin extremes, trapped in limbo and waiting for something – or someone – to guide it into the light.

With his scruffy blond beard, glasses and brown corduroy jacket, Florian Schmidt looks like a sociology professor, something he might have become if fate hadn't intervened. In 2007, fresh from university, he took a part-time job at a foundation with connections to the Green Party. Today, he's a full-time cheerleader for something he calls "KuKQ", the Kunst und Kreativ Quartier. His vision: the empty flower market site transformed into a place where local families mingle with Berlin's cultural elite. Schmidt sees a mixed-use urban center with cheap housing, small shops and artist's studios; he envisions kids taking art classes to help them integrate socially and break the cycle of poverty. Schmidt hopes to harness the power of Kreuzberg's burgeoning art scene to fix a broken community. His grassroots development process has incorporated the community's input from day one – a dramatic contrast to Berlin's typical top-down planning, which has produced such disasters as Media Spree, the massively unpopular office park planned around O2 World.

Central to Schmidt's scheme has been his hope to convince the city to convert the former flower market into Berlin's 'missing *Kunsthalle*': a permanent building devoted to contemporary art that would altogether prolong and fulfill the vision once purported (but not materialized) by the just-dismantled Temporäre *Kunsthalle* on Schloßplatz. To this end, he's lobbied tirelessly and won the support of

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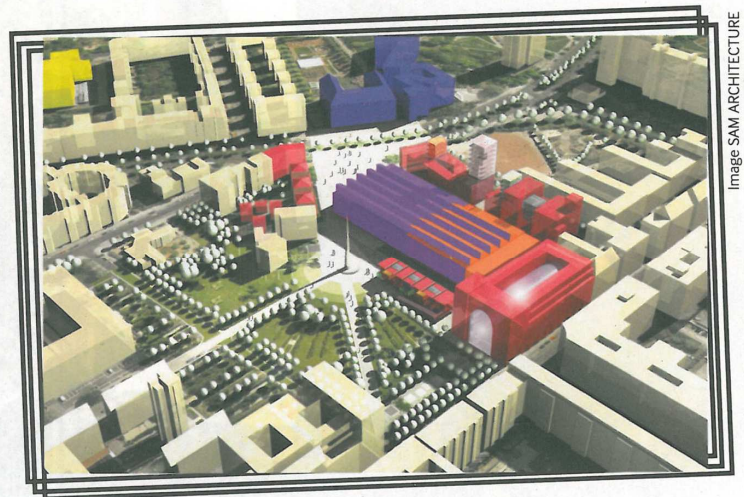


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some political heavy hitters like Franz Schulz, mayor of Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg. For a while, it looked as if the flower market space could be his.

But last spring came the evidence that the city's *Senat* had succumbed to the call of a sweeter siren: the neighboring Jewish Museum's expansion aspirations. In May, Berlin's most popular museum unveiled drawings for a new Daniel Libeskind-designed addition – in the empty flower market building. There were grumbles that the museum got a sweetheart deal: a bargain price for the building, plus €6 million from the city toward the €10 million construction cost. The 'missing *Kunsthalle*' was once more homeless.

Schmidt was disappointed, but not deterred. He shifted gears. His *Kunsthalle* became a nomadic entity, hosting temporary events around the city. And there's still 13,000 m² of empty land around the flower market that's up for grabs – more than enough to realize his KuKQ scheme. Schmidt is calling for a multi-stage process to carefully choose the best ideas and developers. But the owners of the land – the flower market and the city – are breathing down his neck. They want cash now, and are ready to auction off the whole site to the highest bidder. "We need more time," moans Schmidt. He's anxiously lobbying politicians in an effort to give his thoughtful, bottom-up development process a chance.

Will the former Großblumenmarkt site become a mixed-use center that knits together a torn neighborhood, or an island of chic, Mitte-style privilege? There's more at stake here than the future of one lowly community. Berlin will soon embark on a new round of urban design initiatives. What tools should the city's planners be using – a market-driven sledgehammer or a sociologist's surgical scalpel? Can low-income residents play a meaningful role in the decision-making? Can urban planning really help solve Berlin's social ills? For Florian Schmidt, the answers are clear. ●

Florian Schmidt will present his plans at the EXPERIMENTDAYS conference at 20:00 on October 29 at the Forum Factory (Besselstr. 14, Kreuzberg, U-Bhf Kochstr.).

For the KuKQ plans, see www.kreativ-quartier-berlin.de
For *Kunsthalle* events, see www.berliner-kunsthalle.de