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Reclaiming public spaces: Radical alternatives to the exclusionary project of rightsizing policies

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Under the growing pressure of financial markets, the shrinking of public resources and services have been justified by discourses on inefficiency or redundancy in cities adhering to a dominant growth paradigm in urban development and planning, within the framework of austerity policies. Related rightsizing policies are then identifiable as forms of smart shrinkage and can be described as exclusionary projects in a context of increasing social polarisation. In response to these developments, groups of inhabitants have begun employing reclaiming strategies for the co-/self-management of public spaces and services, countering the conversion of common, collective, and state forms of property rights into exclusive private property rights. While these initiatives may, on one hand, be driven by the mainstream rhetoric of the citizen entrepreneurship, social market and "Big Society," which often align with neoliberal frameworks emphasising privatization and individual responsibility, on the other hand, these forms of "subsidiarity with the state" emerged from a counter rhetoric rooted in solidarity, social sustainability and urban justice. This counter rhetoric advocates for collective, community-driven approaches challenging the logic of privatisation and for more equitable and sustainable planning models. Building on these reflections, the article seeks to analyse a paradigmatic case of resistance against privatization through the creation of a radical alternative social project for the self-management of public spaces and service delivery. By examining the compelling case of the illegal occupations and subsequent legalisations of the former hospital Bethanien in Berlin, the article explores how this experience of self-management demonstrated effective alternatives to the reduction of public spaces through the implementation of bottom-up practices aligned with the principles of degrowth.

Keywords: grassroot urbanism, public space privatization, smart shrinking, austerity, urban degrowth, Berlin

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Introduction

This article analyses the illegal occupation and later legalisation of the South wing of the Bethanien complex in Berlin. It explores how organised citizens proposed and implemented alternative strategies for the co-/self-management of public spaces and services, thereby challenging the logic of privatisation. It argues that grassroots resistance to rightsizing and privatisation—exemplified by the emblematic Bethanien case—represents a radical alternative to growth-centric planning paradigms. Drawing on concepts such as distributed agency, "horizontal subsidiarity" and degrowth, the article points to the ways in which community-led practices can contribute to more equitable and sustainable models of urban planning.

The analysed case study represents a case of contested public space where urban memory, planning provisions, and socio-political claims collide, over the conversion of common properties into exclusive private assets. It also illustrates how the discourse of smart shrinkage has been strategically employed to legitimize the privatization of public infrastructures as part of broader growth-oriented urban strategies. The analysis highlights how the same, apparently redundant public asset—the Bethanien complex in Berlin—was treated in two distinct ways in local urban policy debates at different historical moments, reflecting shifts in the dominant economic paradigms before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall. In 1970, a demolition plan was proposed for the Bethanien hospital, justified by population loss and outmigration linked to the construction of the Berlin Wall (Bader & Bialluch, 2009). However, due to strong local resistance against the destruction of an historical building, the complex was preserved and eventually transformed into a public asset. By the early 2000s, the same Bethanien complex was once again at the centre of urban policy debates—this time shaped by strategies aimed at managing urban decline within a broader context of neoliberal urban development and austerity measures (Aalbers & Bernt, 2018). In the case of Berlin, while the 1970s were marked by substantial public investment, the 2000s brought a markedly different scenario, characterized by public disinvestment, the progressive privatization of public assets and services, and a concerted effort to attract private capital flows. Local decision-making has been significantly shaped, since the 2000s on, by budgetary adjustments imposed by the national government, largely in response to the city's high levels of debt—an outcome partly attributable to costly urban development projects of the 1990s designed to attract national and international capital (Marcuse, 1998). Within this neoliberal framework, underutilized or neglected public properties (Bontje, 2004) were increasingly reframed as opportunities for capital accumulation. These strategies typically involve the relocation, reduction or privatization of public and social services, along with the privatization of the spaces where these services are situated. This was particularly true in areas like Kreuzberg East—where the case is situated—which were targeted for actual or potential gentrification.

Andrej Holm's work (2011, 2013, 2014) provides a crucial foundation for understanding how the privatization of public housing and land in Berlin has facilitated the mainstreaming of gentrification as an urban development strategy. He traces this shift to broader changes in planning paradigms, property regimes, and post-reunification economic restructuring. Particularly after the city's financial crisis in the early 2000s, policy decisions enabled the large-scale sell-off of municipal housing stock, reducing affordability and opening space for speculative investment. In neighbourhoods like Prenzlauer Berg, Kreuzberg, and Neukölln, these dynamics intensified displacement pressures and reconfigured urban space.

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Against this backdrop, the resistance to the privatization of the Bethanien complex becomes a key case for understanding how these urban conflicts unfold in a wider political economy of urban transformation, where privatizations, smart shrinking and gentrification are no longer an exception, but a strategic orientation embedded in neoliberal urban governance. Additionally, the analysis of the radical actions (including squatting, occupation, organized protest and self-management) resisting rightsizing policies and its side-effects, offers a comparative political economy perspective while integrating a social production framework (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1980). Furthermore, the conflict-driven citizenship in the analysed case, through its experimentation and implementation of diverse forms of radical participation (De Nardis & Antonazzo, 2017; Kusiak, 2024), highlights the constructive and planning potential that participation can embody (Rossini & Bianchi, 2019).

Sheila Foster (2006) argues that through networks of trust, community engagement, and shared resource management social capital fosters urban commons that help revitalize distressed and undervalued neighbourhoods, generating and realizing value in urban contexts. Ongoing experiments in self-organisation and empowerment—such as the insurgent grassroots practices illustrated in the case study—challenge "profit-based urbanisation" by advancing alternative, radically democratic, and sustainable forms of urbanism (Brenner et al., 2012, p. 177). Grounded in the notion of a "city for people, not for profit," these forms of social innovation can act as catalysts for transformative urban development. They confront entrenched institutional practices and open up spaces for grassroots initiatives to thrive (Moulaert et al., 2007). Within this framework, the concept of distributed agency (Healey, 2022) becomes essential to understanding how such processes unfold and gain relevance in the realms of community planning and local governance. This perspective foregrounds a decentralised view of agency—emphasising how it is dispersed across multiple networks and actors, each playing a role in shaping collective decision-making. The analysis of concrete cases of successful grassroots practices and experimentation with alternative governance approaches to resist and oppose privatization processes can help challenge traditional top-down planning by advocating for more inclusive and collaborative governance models.

By examining grassroots alternative solutions grounded in forms of "horizontal subsidiarity" between informal and formal actors, this article explores how such models of socio-economic governance can resonate with degrowth principles—rethinking cities to move away from endless growth and toward a more sustainable, equitable, and well-being-focused approach. These initiatives challenge the growth bias embedded in planning by demonstrating that "shrinking cities could do better with reduced resources" (Aalbers & Bernt, 2018, p. 2). In this light, Kraker et al. (2024) pose the question of whether shrinking cities might serve as testing grounds for the practical application of degrowth's radical sustainability principles. Responding to this, Hermans et al. (2024) offer an optimistic perspective, suggesting that degrowth-oriented planning practices can be conceptualized as experimental approaches. Such practices aim to harness the conditions of urban shrinkage to foster social and ecological well-being through collaborative learning and innovation.

At the same time, Demaria et al. (2013) argue that dominant growth-driven rationales in urban planning often fail to engage with the pressing social, economic, and ecological limits communities face (see also Bailey et al., 2010; North, 2010). Lehtinen (2018) reinforces this critique by linking degrowth to the promotion of autonomy, relocalisation, and a dismantling of economic dependencies (Latouche, 2010; Kallis et al., 2015). Importantly, urban movements opposing austerity and rightsizing policies reveal the multi-scalar nature of these struggles, highlighting how local territories are embedded in and shaped by global capital flows. This

raises broader questions about the need to challenge the mainstream economy itself as a driver of both urban shrinkage and socio-spatial exclusion (Aalbers & Bernt, 2018).

After this introduction, Section 2 situates the case within broader debates on how neoliberal restructuring influences rightsizing policies and resistance to them. Section 3 examines the national and local contexts that have enabled or justified such strategies, particularly in relation to austerity and the privatisation of public goods. Section 4 outlines the methodology adopted for the empirical analysis. Section 5 presents the case study, focusing on how organised resistance to privatisation projects in Berlin has articulated bottom-up alternatives. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the transformative potential of these initiatives and discusses their relevance for rethinking planning policies through the lens of degrowth and sustainability.

Right sizing exclusionary project and the emergence of forms of resistance

Trust, Rightsizing, and Privatization

As David Harvey (2012) argues in *Rebel Cities*, contemporary urban spaces are increasingly shaped by conflicts rooted in dispossession and exclusionary dynamics. The commodification of collective resources pits global capital interests against the social needs of local communities, resulting in the privatization of public assets, the displacement of low-income residents, and growing socio-spatial inequalities. In the wake of the global financial crisis and overlapping systemic shocks, these tensions have exposed the reciprocal relationship between planning and crisis (Ponzini, 2016), further fuelling public distrust and disillusionment with institutional planning frameworks.

This sense of exclusion is reinforced by the persistence of rigid, non-negotiable *master narratives*—such as austerity urbanism, smart shrinking, and growth-centric planning—that continue to dominate urban agendas. As a result, urban development strategies are increasingly perceived as bureaucratic, disconnected from community needs, and aligned with powerful interests. Discretionary planning practices often bypass democratic mechanisms, consolidating elite-driven priorities and side-lining grassroots demands (Swain & Tait, 2007; Kwok et al., 2018; Swyngedouw et al., 2002). These exclusionary dynamics become particularly evident in the policy framework of "rightsizing," which exemplifies how growth-centric and austerity-driven narratives are operationalized in urban governance under the guise of pragmatic planning.

Initially framed as a pragmatic solution to population loss and disinvestment, rightsizing has often reinforced the neoliberal logic of austerity and privatization. Narratives of actual or anticipated urban decline are commonly linked to economic stagnation, state deregulation, and the erosion of socio-economic governance (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Harvey, 2001; Peck & Tickell, 2002). Aalbers and Bernt (2018) argue that, while rightsizing policies are seen by some as pragmatic, they frequently deepen socio-economic inequalities, marginalizing low-income and minority groups. Rooted in neoliberal urbanisation, these policies typically focus on downsizing infrastructure, privatizing public spaces, and repurposing land, prioritising profit-driven objectives. Haase et al. (2014) discuss how urban shrinkage and austerity programs can create critical moments in the governance of contemporary cities. They argue that shrinkage is not merely a demographic or economic issue but also a governance challenge. Their findings underscore how urban shrinkage, under conditions of austerity, reveals structural tensions and can intensify poverty and governance pressures. Ferreira et al. (2024) investigates how pro-growth urban policies—specifically those linked to real estate speculation—can paradoxically induce urban shrinkage, using the city of Coimbra, Portugal,

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as a case study. Contrary to dominant theories that view urban shrinkage as a consequence of insufficient economic growth, the authors argue that urban decline in Coimbra is driven by policies aimed at promoting growth through real estate investment. The commodification of housing, incentivized by national and EU fiscal policies, results in soaring housing prices, displacing younger and vulnerable residents to peripheral areas. This phenomenon is described as a form of induced smart shrinking, in which the state and local authorities benefit from rising property values—through taxes and fees—while disregarding the social fallout.

In many cities, including Berlin (Holm, 2011, 2013, 2014), rightsizing policies have provided new spatial fixes for capital investment (Aalbers & Bernt, 2018) and are frequently framed as an exclusionary strategy (Bernt, 2009; Rhodes & Russo, 2013). These programmes often target public properties and services, leading to forms of alienation that disproportionately impact low-income and ethnic-minority neighbourhoods (Aalbers, 2014; Brandes Gratz 1989; Wallace and Wallace 1998). This can further justify dynamics that are defined by Harvey (2004) as "accumulation by dispossession," where public resources and spaces are commodified and privatized. As cities restructure to attract investment and enhance competitiveness, public spaces are transformed into commodified assets, accessible only to those who can afford them (Smith, 1996). Furthermore, the prioritisation of flagship projects, such as waterfront developments and cultural landmarks, channels public resources into spaces designed for tourists and investors, while neglecting the everyday needs of local communities (Colomb, 2017).

This process further marginalizes vulnerable populations, diminishing public spaces as sites of democratic engagement and collective ownership. Patterns of "planned shrinkage," including budget cuts and service reductions, disproportionately harm low-income neighbourhoods, exacerbating inequalities (Wallace & Wallace, 1998). Additionally, "classical strategies" aimed at attracting businesses and middle-class residents often divert resources from supporting liveability and social welfare, further destabilizing vulnerable populations (Bernt et al., 2014; Pallagst et al., 2017). In the U.S., rightsizing has been criticized for fostering "shrinkage machines" that prioritise market reconfiguration over social equity, enabling predatory capital accumulation (Hackworth, 2015). By contrast, European cities, supported by centralised funding structures, tend to experience less severe impacts compared to U.S. cities reliant on local property taxes (Aalbers & Bernt, 2018). Yet, in both U.S. and European cases, rightsizing policies are marked by their role in reshaping markets, consolidating services in dense areas while neglecting less profitable ones. This dynamic underscore the inherently exclusionary nature of such policies, which frequently result in gentrification and displacement.

Insights from the analysis of Berlin's "interim spaces" by Colomb (2017) provide an additional layer to understanding rightsizing policies. Temporary uses of vacant urban spaces, initially framed as innovative and community-oriented solutions to address underutilized land (SenStadt, 2007), often become co-opted by market-driven logics. The trajectory of these spaces highlights tensions between grassroots initiatives and their incorporation into formal urban policies, where temporary uses are exploited to enhance the marketability of areas targeted for redevelopment (Colomb, 2012). This dynamic exemplifies how rightsizing can serve as a prelude to gentrification, with interim uses and forms of transition urbanism acting as tools to attract investment while marginalizing original users and communities (Mould, 2014).

Yet, in contexts where institutions have failed to adequately plan the future of decommissioned spaces, entire districts, or even economic sectors, bottom-up initiatives have often assumed a crucial role in reclaiming and repurposing abandoned areas. These experiences illustrate the capacity of informal actors to realize collective projects, responding to a growing demand

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for participation. These "voids," precisely because they are "not fixed to a single interpretation or intention," have the potential to become genuinely public spaces, where conflicting interests are continuously negotiated and no definitive resolution is ever reached (Borret, 2009). Sheridan (2007) defines indeterminate territories as "any area, space, or building where the city's normal forces of control have not shaped how we perceive, use, and occupy them" (p. 98). This understanding points to a perception of "freedom of opportunity" in indeterminate spaces, where the low degree of institutional determination does not limit—but instead enhances—the potential embedded in the vacant site (de Solà-Morales, 1995). If we consider these indeterminate urban areas as places where multiple interests and desires are negotiated, we begin to see how power relations—shaped by political, economic, and social dynamics—play a fundamental role in determining whose visions, needs, and claims prevail.

This section helps to convey that rightsizing is not merely a reaction to decline, but often a strategic tool for neoliberal restructuring. It highlights how austerity and market logic are embedded in urban policy under the guise of efficiency, while actually facilitating exclusion, displacement, and spatial inequality. Furthermore, the concept of indeterminate urban spaces offers a critical lens through which to examine the contradictions of smart shrinking that can act as pretexts for future exclusion. Bottom-up initiatives in urban voids reveal the capacity of informal actors to produce collective value outside institutional frameworks. However, as these spaces are increasingly instrumentalized in market-driven redevelopment strategies, their original social function is marginalized. This tension highlights how smart shrinking policies risk co-opting grassroots energy while reinforcing exclusionary dynamics, ultimately subordinating spatial indeterminacy to capital-driven urban renewal agendas.

Grassroots Creativity, City marketing and the "Big Society" discourse

Colomb (2012) highlights how temporary uses of space in Berlin during the 2000s became a focal point for understanding the intersections between grassroots creativity, city marketing, and neoliberal urbanism. Initially arising from bottom-up initiatives to reclaim underutilized spaces, these practices were later absorbed into the "creative city" discourse, which reframed temporary uses as strategic tools for urban branding and economic development. For instance, the integration of these practices into city marketing campaigns allowed Berlin to position itself as a hub of innovation and creativity, while simultaneously paving the way for the displacement of the very communities and activities that initially made these spaces vibrant. Novy and Colomb (2013) explore how urban social movements in these two German cities have responded to the rise of neoliberal urban policies, particularly those that promote the "creative city" agenda. By critically examining how these policies, often framed as fostering cultural vibrancy and innovation, contributed to processes of gentrification, displacement, and the commodification of urban space, they highlight the ways in which local residents, activists, and grassroots organizations have mobilized to contest these developments, reclaim urban spaces, and articulate alternative visions for city life.

Mayer (2013) further highlights how neoliberal urbanism has absorbed activist principles into its agenda. Public-private partnerships and entrepreneurial governance frameworks co-opt these principles, offering a veneer of inclusivity while continuing to prioritise the interests of elites. Forms of solidarity and resistance have often been incorporated into market-driven frameworks. The Big Society[1] discourse, for example, reframed collective action and voluntary

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[1] The Big Society was a socio-political concept for a redefinition of the relationship between citizens and the state. Prominent during the first 15 years of the 21st century, it was developed by the populist strategist Steve Hilton. It aimed to merge free market economics with a conservative paternalist vision of the social contract, drawing inspiration from the civic conservatism of David Willetts in the 1990s. The concept significantly shaped the 2010

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efforts as substitutes for state-provided services within the context of austerity (LSE Politics and Policy, 2011). This approach is based on the premise that the "big state" has not been effective and is economically unsustainable and sought to redefine governance by decentralising power and encouraging civic engagement. The intention behind it is to move from a culture where people look to officials and government to solve their problems, to a culture where people solve the problems they face themselves aided by government.

By promoting local entrepreneurialism and citizen-led initiatives as gap-fillers for shrinking public budgets, this discourse masked the withdrawal of state responsibilities and framed community action within a neoliberal logic. Such co-optation often redirects grassroots energy in implementing local-based solutions, based on sustainability and solidarity into a tool for cost-cutting rather than a pathway to systemic change. Ultimately, these trends can serve to further justify rightsizing policies since these practices are not immune to absorption into the very frameworks they oppose.

Performing de-growth and "the right to the city" through the defence of the commons

As mentioned before, "urban social movements" (Castells, 1983) arise from these tensions, embodying the "right to the city" as a demand for agency over urbanisation processes (Harvey, 2012). These movements resist the commodification of urban spaces, advocating for the reclamation of the urban "commons" (Ostrom, 1990), where governance and resources are managed collectively rather than through market-driven or neoliberal frameworks (Brenner et al., 2012; Harvey, 2012). In this context, interest in the commons—as mechanisms that address responsible resource appropriation while fostering autonomous management and democratic decision-making—has grown significantly in recent years and has taken on new political significance, as highlighted by Di Feliciantonio (2017), contributing to a more radical and progressive understanding of governance mechanisms.

At the heart of these movements lies Lefebvre's (1991) concept of the "right to the city," which calls for a fundamental shift in urban governance to serve the collective needs of residents rather than capitalist interests. It emphasizes limiting commodification in favor of democratic urbanism based on use-value. According to Purcell (2002), this right comprises two core elements: participation—direct involvement in urban decision-making—and appropriation—the ability for residents to shape and transform urban spaces to meet their collective needs.

These movements have proven to seek to reorient urban planning away from growth impulses and toward sustainable practices that emphasise social equity, ecological balance, and community-driven agency. In order to propose viable solutions for the "right to the city" and the commons, the grassroots practices described in this article align with the principles of degrowth movements and reclaim forms of horizontal subsidiarity with the state.

The concept of "degrowth" emerged as a critique of the unsustainable and unequal consequences of economic growth. Gaining prominence in the early 21**st** century, degrowth has evolved into both a theoretical framework and a grassroots movement focused on

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UK Conservative Party general election manifesto and informed the legislative agenda of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government. Its stated objectives included: Empowering communities through localism and devolution; Promoting active participation in community life (volunteerism); Shifting authority from central government to local authorities; Supporting cooperatives, mutuals, charities, and social enterprises; Increasing government transparency by publishing data. https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/download-big-society-look-97a.pdf

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ecological and social sustainability (Latouche, 2009; Demaria et al., 2013).[2] It promotes deeper democracy, grassroots action, and equitable wealth redistribution. Among practical applications of degrowth we can mention "distributed agency" as a practical expression of degrowth, particularly through feminist perspectives that redefine agency as emerging from interdependent care relationships that define and fulfil fundamental human needs across time and space, as discussed by Alves de Matos (2024).

As we will see, the concept of *horizontal subsidiarity* offers a concrete institutional pathway for operationalizing degrowth-oriented urban governance counteracting the spread of privatization linked to rightsizing policies. Horizontal subsidiarity is either explicitly codified or implicitly embedded in the governance principles of many European nations. The concept supports the role of civil society and private actors in addressing societal needs, often framed within broader themes of decentralisation, community empowerment, and public-private collaboration. While horizontal subsidiarity is not explicitly mentioned, its principles are indirectly supported by the German model of governance in several ways: the commitment to being a "social federal State" suggests a focus on decentralisation, citizen participation, and support for collective social responsibility; while not specified in Article 20,[3] Germany's social market economy (*Soziale Marktwirtschaft*) and welfare system incorporate subsidiarity principles, fostering cooperation between State and non-State actors (e.g., civil society organisations, cooperatives, and private institutions) in delivering public services; the principle of subsidiarity in Germany is operationalized through its welfare system (e.g., partnerships with non-governmental organisations, churches, and social institutions), reflecting horizontal subsidiarity in action.

To name another European country, the concept of "subsidiarity" is explicitly mentioned in Article 118 of the Italian Constitution—introduced during the constitutional reform of 2001. The article generally highlights the principle of vertical subsidiarity, while the concept of horizontal subsidiarity is explicitly addressed in its second part: *"The State, regions, metropolitan cities, provinces, and municipalities shall promote the autonomous initiatives of citizens, individually or in association, to carry out activities of general interest, on the basis of the principle of subsidiarity."*

This clause embodies horizontal subsidiarity by emphasising the role of individuals, communities, and private entities in supporting the public interest, often in collaboration with public authorities. It establishes that public authorities should support and collaborate with individuals and civil society groups to enable them to engage in activities that serve the public interest.

As Liu (2020) notes, such actions can gradually become normalized practices facilitated by formal institutions (Haase et al., 2012; Murtagh, 2016). These initiatives bypass conventional plan-making and effectively address urgent needs. They reveal opportunity spaces that challenge the logic of path dependency (Garud & Karnøe 2001; Grillitsch & Sotarauta 2018). Yet, when negotiating bottom-up visions within stakeholder dynamics, it is essential to

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[2] Degrowth draws from diverse intellectual streams, including ecological economics, critiques of development, justice, democracy, bioeconomics, and the quest for well-being beyond material consumption. Among the foundational works, Serge Latouche's (2009) *Farewell to Growth* critiques the growth imperative inherent in capitalist economies and advocates for degrowth as a necessary shift toward sustainability and equity. Similarly, Schneider et al. (2010) explore the theoretical underpinnings of degrowth and its potential to address ecological and social crises. Kallis (2011) further advances the discussion by addressing criticisms of the concept and explores its capacity to promote well-being within ecological limits.

[3] The concept of horizontal subsidiarity is present in the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany (*Grundgesetz*), Article 20.

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consider that agency can be included or excluded through narratives, visions, and agendas, and these dynamics can shift with local conditions (Liu, 2020). A shift toward governance approaches that integrate distributed agency (Healey, 2007) and social imagination in strategy-making is then the key redefining power dynamics (Albrechts 2004; Alexander 2000).

Berlin between crisis and smart shrinking dynamics

During the 1990s, largely as a result of the East Germany annexation process, Germany experienced massive privatizations. These were framed within a political discourse emphasising the need to reduce the surplus of public properties inherited from the former socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR). This process also aimed to attract foreign companies to invest in the newly privatized entities, thereby fostering the internationalization of the economy (Marcuse, 1998; Häussermann & Strom, 1994; Häussermann, 2003).

Simultaneously, Berlin faced significant economic challenges. The collapse of the city's industrial base—due to the closure of most factories and the cessation of state subsidies that had sustained West Berlin for decades—led to the loss of productive activities in both the eastern and western parts of the city. This, combined with heavy investment in infrastructures, pushed Berlin's finances to a breaking point. However, the spending spree of the 1990s came to an abrupt halt in 2001 due to a large-scale banking scandal involving significant portions of Berlin's political class. The near-bankruptcy of Berlin in 2001 forced the City-State of Berlin (*Land*) to implement severe cuts in public expenditure in an attempt to address its mounting debt. Yet, the debt grew from 80 billion DM, approximately 35 billion euros in 2001 (Hooper, 2001) to approximately 60 billion euros by 2010 (Colomb, 2012).

Under the combined pressures of the federal government, in the 2000s, a second phase of financial restructuring began, the Berlin government launched an unprecedented programme of divestments and privatizations (Calandindes & Grésillon, 2021). This included the sale of housing, gas, electricity, and other assets. Among these measures, the most consequential was the massive sell-off of social housing, urban land, and public companies to private real estate companies and international investment funds, a decision that would have lasting impacts on the city's urban fabric (Colomb, 2012; Holm, 2011, 2013, 2014). Public assets were systematically listed and classified into pools to serve as collateral for third-party investments.

Concurrently, new laws were introduced to reform the local taxation system on public properties. These reforms involved implementing a new property tax and revaluing cadastral values, putting pressure on local administrations to privatize a wide array of public assets (e.g., the *Kalkulatorische Kosten* law introduced in Germany in 2005—see page 14). Furthermore, increasing cuts in public funding, driven by neoliberal restructuring programmes, exacerbated the challenges municipalities faced in maintaining public services. Consequently, privatization of public tasks and entities often became the only perceived viable solution for local governments struggling with mounting financial pressures.

According to the interviewee KFBA 1 (politician from the Green Party and part of the Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg Borough Administration since 2001), after reunification, Berlin was a city with very low rents, a lot of empty spaces and many buildings owned by the State, the Senate of Berlin or the city districts:

> Many were not in use anymore or not needed, like many schools because of the decrease in birth rates. On the other hand, Berlin was—and in part still is—a very poor city, and the city administration had accumulated many debts. That's why the policies in Berlin, after 1989, were

designed to try to gain a better economic situation, for instance, selling public properties.[4]

However, as the large-scale privatization of public spaces reduced access to public resources, grassroots movements emerged, challenging these policies and reviving the debate on the 'right to the city' (Colomb, 2012, 2017; Rossini, 2017; Rossini et al., 2018; Rossini & Bianchi, 2019; see also Kusiak, 2024, on the Deutsche Wohnen & Co. enteignen referendum). Furthermore, since the 1970s, numerous bottom-up initiatives have emerged in Berlin, with urban social movements reclaiming spaces through organized action.

Methodology

Berlin has been selected for this research analysis because it has experienced both urban shrinking dynamics and the application of smart shrinking discourse to urban development strategies. Moreover, it is relevant to mention the special status of Germany's federal system that grants significant independence to the *Länder* (regions / states). In Berlin case, this independence is further reflected in the governance of its boroughs. Berlin's boroughs are managed by Borough Councils (*Bezirksamt*), which enjoy a high degree of independence from the city government due Berlin's unique status as a city-state since 1990. Because Berlin is a "unified community," district offices are not dependent on local government functions but practice. The Borough Council oversees district administration and decides the district's budget, although this budget requires approval from the House of Representatives. Berlins executive body is the Senate of Berlin. Furthermore, in 2004, the city approved the District Administration Act (§ 44-47 – BzVwG), which allows for local referendums (*Burgerbegehren*) to address conflicts related to local policies and development plans.

This research was conducted between 2013 and 2023 using a qualitative interpretative methodology, including participant observations, interviews, and discourse analysis of media sources and legislation (including "A new concept for Bethanien" document). The latter is a comprehensive document that compiles ideas and concepts generated during workshops and meetings organized by the *Initiative for Future Bethanien* group. It outlines concepts developed for the South wing of Bethanien, intended to serve as foundational principles for the property's future development. The analysis of the case study discussed in this paper refers to Chapter 4 of the aforementioned document ("A new concept for Bethanien"), which details the administration of Bethanien, including models of self-government, residents' forum, and sponsorship structures.

I was hosted at the *New Yorck im Bethanien* housing project (an alternative housing strategy for collective living) for two weeks and participated in assemblies and activities in its "public space" over several months. The final interviews for this research were conducted in 2023. For the Berlin case study, the following interviews were conducted: four semi-structured interviews with tenants/activists from the *New Yorck im Bethanien* project (NYB 1, 2, 3, 4) and informal interviews with residents of the house project; informal interviews with individuals involved in the *Initiative for Future Bethanien* project; one semi-structured interview with a key actor from the "Bethanien for all" campaign (Bfa 1); one semi-structured interview with a politician from the Kreuzberg-Friedrichshain Borough Administration (KFBA 1, Green Party); two semi-structured interviews with activists/scholars engaged in action research on housing movements in Berlin in 2013 (Andrej Holm and Armin Kuhn); annual conversation with one of the founders, tenants, and activists involved in the *New Yorck im Bethanien* project.

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[4] For population data on Berlin since the 1990s, see Statista: https://www.statista.com/statistics/505892/berlin-population/

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The Bethanien: The history of a public space and grassroots resistance to its privatization

The Bethanien complex is located in East Kreuzberg and is surrounded by a large green public square known as Mariannenplatz (Figure 1). Despite its geographical centrality within the city, East Kreuzberg was considered marginal during the Cold War due to its position: "Kreuzberg SO 36 became a pocket extending into the East, bounded on three sides by the Berlin Wall» (Bader, Bialluch, 2005, 93). During the Cold War, the area's buildings decayed and its marginality made it home to precarious workers, seasonal Turkish workers, radical political activists, students, unemployed people and artists. This unique demographic contributed to the definition of the so-called *Kreuzberg Mischung* (Kreuzberg mix), a term that describes both Kreuzberg's diverse social fabric and the peculiar mix of commercial and residential activities (Rada, 1997). Additionally, this mix fostered the development of politically and socially alternative and resistant milieus in the area (Störve, 2012).

In particular, as a consequence of the construction of the Berlin Wall, the city experienced a steadily decline in its German population (Miller, 1993). To counteract this trend (Pugh, 2014), the Federal Republic of Germany implemented a continuous stream of subsidies for West Berlin, which remained in place until 1994. These aids were intended to lower business taxes (Störve, 2012) and cover relocation expenses for West Germans willing to move to West Berlin. By the time of reunification, approximately 300.000 foreigners were living in West Berlin, including 128.000 Turkish immigrants (Störve., 2012).

After the construction of the Wall, the need to expand public housing stock was addressed through the implementation of the policy known as "clear-cut renovations" (*Kahlschlag* or *Flächensanierung*). However, this approach "only exacerbated an existing housing crisis through rampant speculation and local corruption" (Vasudevan, 2011, 290). Designed to address "future middle class" with higher rents, this policy for constructing subsidized housing led to a housing shortage and contributed to the emergence of a resistant and conflict-driven community in the area (Berger, 1987). Among the groups formed in response was the Berlin Squatters' Movement (Holm & Kuhn, 2011; Vasudevan, 2011, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c).
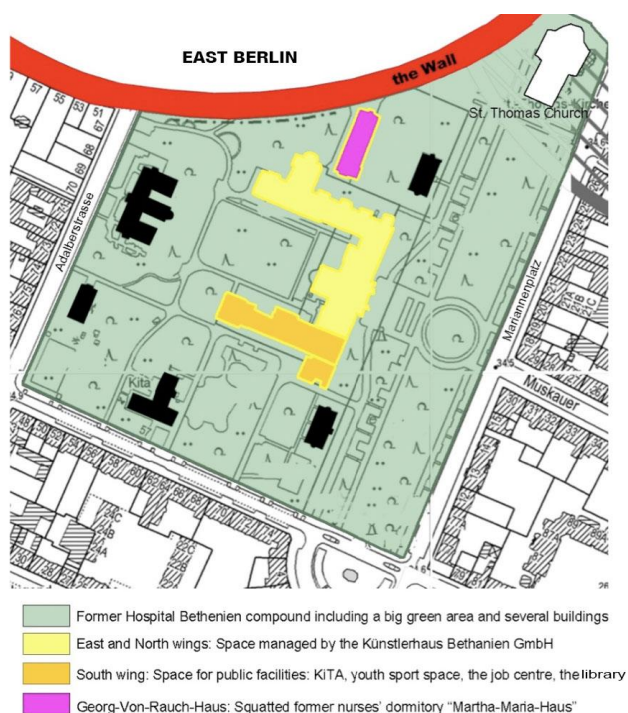
Today's, the district, now central to the new geography of the city, has become focal point for Berlin's urban marketing strategies. "Visit Berlin" promotional website noted in 2014: "Kreuzberg is Berlin's most interesting and fascinating district, where to experience urban buzz, vibrancy and diversity at every turn". Consequently, the district has undergone significant gentrification and touristification, alongside major urban regeneration projects, including mega-projects along the river Spree. These developments have intensified pressure on the privatization of public estates, exacerbating displacement and sparking new local conflicts. The story of Bethanien is closely tied to Kreuzberg's history and the urban conflicts mentioned above.

Bethanien was established as Deaconess Hospital in the years 1845 and 1847. In 1963, following the construction of the Wall in 1961, which separated East and West Berlin, the first Urban Renewal programme for the Kottbusser Tor area, including Mariannenplatz where the Bethanien complex is located, was initiated. The division of the city caused a dramatic drop in the number of patients and nuns coming from the eastern part, leading to the insolvency of the hospital. In 1968, the city administration planned closing the hospital and implementing large-scale demolition and redevelopment of the area to create public housing stock. However, in 1969, demolition was halted due to the "Struggle for Bethanien" (*Kampf um Bethanien*), a protest campaign organised by community groups and preservationists. The campaign

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included strategic site occupations (Figure 2). As a result of these efforts, in 1970, the Bethanien complex was transferred to city ownership. The management of the building was entrusted to several local non-profit organisations engaged in cultural and artistic activities, as well as providing community services.

Just a year after, the student movement, advocating for alternative cultural spaces and collective housing (*Hausprojekt*), illegally occupied the dormitory formerly used by the nurses-nuns (Figure 1). They established a students' housing project named after Georg von Rauch, a young anarchist killed in a police shootout just days prior. This squat was officially regularized as a "youth hostel" just one year later. In 1974, the South wing of the Bethanien complex was repurposed as a community service space, accommodating a big job centre, a nursery, a kindergarten, a public gym, among other services (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Map of Mariannenplatz and the reappropriation of the Bethanien space that took place between 1970 and 1975. Source: created by the author

Figure 2. 1975's newspaper cover: "Bethanien is occupied". Source: Dem Volke dienen 5.2.1975, 4 Jahrgang, Nr.3

The situation remained stable until 2002, when the district of Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg planned to sell the Bethanien complex to a private investor. Existing institutions were forced to vacate the building to make way for the planned "International Cultural incubator" (*Internationale Kulturelle Griinderzentrum*). In 2005, the Senator of Finance, Thilo Sarrazin, introduced the *Kalkulatorische Kosten* law, which required local governments to bear significant "indirect" costs associated with public property under their jurisdiction.

> When I started my political experience in the parliament of the Friedrichshain-kreuzberg city district in 2001 the issue of the Bethanien was representing the symbol of the shift from indifference to concern about the sale of public assets. The district parliament considered the privatization as the only possible solution due to a very complex financial issue: a financial cost

> voice called *Kalkulatorische Kosten* that were invented to make public properties too expensive particularly if the properties are underutilized or vacant. (KFBA 1)

The job centre, which had been active for 30 years, was closed, and the three floors of the South wing were vacated. In the preceding years, other public services, important for the community, were also shut down, including the Turkish-German library and the seniors' meeting space in 2004, while the kindergarten and music school faced threats of relocation. This series of closures and threats fuelled widespread discontent, as displaced or endangered public services were vital resource for many neighbours. Once the local administration's privatization plan became public, protests began to take shape. According to one of the neighbours (Bfa 1):

> The preconditions for the spreading of discontent among the neighbours, particularly within the Turkish community, was that the German-Turkish library had been removed from the complex. Some considered it to be an important place for the neighbourhood, because it was a place of encounter for people from different cultures.

Many neighbours attempted to gain access to these vacant spaces by proposing activities and projects to the district, such as workshops and workspaces, but all of these proposals were either rejected or ignored, with officials claiming that no spaces were available at all" (Bfa 1).

For residents and citizens, the proposed privatization of the complex was seen as a consequence of mismanagement and the lack of a programmatic "new concept" for the Bethanien complex:

> The district administration failed for years to develop a coherent and cost-recovery concept for the use of Bethanien. By mid-2005, after years of district administration, the situation was marked by vacancy, the absence of a general concept, deferred rehabilitation, and an unclear financial framework. (From "A New Concept for Future Bethanien" document)

Due to forecasts predicting changes in the neighbourhood's social fabric, local authorities considered relocating all facilities not explicitly connected to art and culture out of the complex. This implicitly supported the slow but progressive gentrification of the area, attracting middle and creative classes more interested in cultural and artistic activities. It is worth noting that, by the time of the planned project, the Mariannenplatz area including the Bethanien complex, was part of the *Quartiersmanagement* project. This shows that the anticipated gentrification process was planned in an area that was, in fact, part of a project identifying zones in Berlin significantly affected by social degradation and high levels of social disadvantage—classified as "areas with special development needs" (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. *The Mariannenplats Quartiersmanagement (red area); the Bethanien complex area (red dashed line). Source: Quartiersmanagement / detailed localisations created by the author*

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The privatization plan proposed by the Borough Council was not well understood by the citizens, who feared both the relocation of essential services away from the area and the unintended consequence of contributing to the displacement of the local population. On June 11, 2004, as a form of protest, the three vacant floors of the Bethanien South wing were occupied by former tenants of the historic *Hausprojekt Yorckstrasse 59*, just days after their violent eviction (Figure 4). In response, neighbours and community groups decided to join the forces with the squatters to launch the *Bethanien für alle* ("Bethanien for all") campaign.

> At the beginning we were more focused on finding a new place to start a negotiation. Then some neighbours came in the next days and told us about the story of the privatization. So, we joined our forces and started the struggle for Bethanien. (NYB 1)

Figure 4. *Photos of the Bethanien complex during the occupation: main entrance, squatting action banner, and tags on the South wing. Source: photos provided by the New Yorck im Bethanien tenants*

Figure 5. *Franz Schulz (centre left in the photo) and Kristian Ströbele (to his right) at the press conference organised in the recently squatted Bethanien South wing. Source: photos provided by the New Yorck im Bethanien tenants*

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The day after the squatting action took place, the squatters organised a press conference, inviting newspapers and local politicians (Figure 5) who attended the event: "For us, it meant that they were supporting us" (NYB 1).

The entire neighbourhood quickly became aware of the action:

> This resulted in a large gathering of neighbours who supported the occupation because it meant that the doors had been opened and they finally had access to these spaces. So, the two things came together—the local community campaign and the action of the squatters. (Bfa 1)

Soon after the occupation of the vacant premise, the campaign *Bethanien für alle* was established through the merging of interests and political actions:

> We invented the campaign together with the neighbours after we took over the space. Some individuals had the intention of building a campaign against the privatization, but at that time, it was a very small group, mainly including people directly affected by the privatization, such as those working in activities located in the South wing, like the kindergarten, which would have to move if the property was sold. The issue became known by the public opinion after the newspapers got involved and real protests mobilisation began. (NYB 2)

The campaign *Initiative Zukunft Bethanien* (IZB – Initiative for the future Bethanien) successfully collected 14.000 signatures, enough to launch a citizens' initiative for a local referendum (*Bürgerbegehren*) to halt the privatization of Bethanien. The group began to meet in the squatted South wing to develop alternative proposals for the building's future public use, which they aimed to negotiate with the local authorities. In 2006, the Borough Council of Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg decided not to call the referendum. Instead, the council initiated negotiations with the group involved in the campaign *Bethanien für alle*, including the squatters (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Photos from Bethanien's St. Thomas Church, where discussions were held with groups involved in the Bethanien für alle campaign and the squat. Source: photos provided by the New Yorck im Bethanien tenants

As a result of the collaborative effort of various individuals involved in the framework of the IZB's activities, to individuate alternatives to the privatization, the "A new concept for Bethanien. On the way to a cultural, artistic, political, and social centre from below" was published as a printed book in 2006 (Figure 7).

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Figure 7. *"A new concept for Bethanien. On the way to a cultural, artistic, political, and social center from below". Book created by the groups active in the IZB (Initiative for Future Bethanien) in 2006. Source: document provided by the New Yorck im Bethanien tenants*

> The Initiative Zukunft Bethanien (IZB) is a free association of diverse individuals and initiatives from Kreuzberg and beyond. Our goal is to prevent the privatization of Bethanien as an "International Cultural Incubator" and instead, with the participation of all current users, to create a cultural, artistic, political, and social center from the bottom up, especially with the involvement of local residents. In this context, we are also working on issues related to the future of Bethanien, such as the privatization of the city, the loss of public space, changes in the social structure and Hartz IV, migration and racism, cultural policy, etc. (extract from the book).

It also included an analysis of the costs and management challenges that needed to be addressed with the Kreuzberg-Friedrichshain Borough Administration, demonstrating the feasibility of the project. Thanks to the citizens' ideas and proposals detailed in the document, an agreement was reached after three years of negotiations over the alternative plan developed by active participants involved in the process.

The critical issue to address was primarily the excessive costs of management. On closer examination, the system of imputed costs (*Kalkulatorischen Kosten*) was revealed to be opaque, a problem that became particularly evident in the Bethanien case. Due to the costs imposed by the Berlin Senate on public property management, districts are subjected to inaccurate assessments that produce the controversial outcome of renting private land being cheaper than using publicly owned buildings for public purposes. This results in a systematic and engineered push towards the privatization of public estates.

Since 2006, districts have been required to calculate the management costs of public properties (which are managed by the districts in Berlin) to include a "fictitious return on capital", known as "imputed costs", for approval by the Berlin Senate. The Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg Borough Administration presented an unsustainably high-cost estimate for managing the Bethanien complex. In the case of Bethanien's main building, its market value was assessed at € 2.6 million, while its acquisition value was estimated at € 32 million. Due to the *Kalkulatorische Kosten*, the Borough had to pay capital interest on this value. Until that

point, the actual costs (bar 1 on Figure 8) for managing and maintaining the building had been less than € 500.000 annually. Private sector management (bar 2), including a return on capital, would spend less than 600.000 euro per year. However, because of *Kalkulatorisch Kosten* law, the Borough (bar 3) was required to spend approximately 1,4 million euro annually.
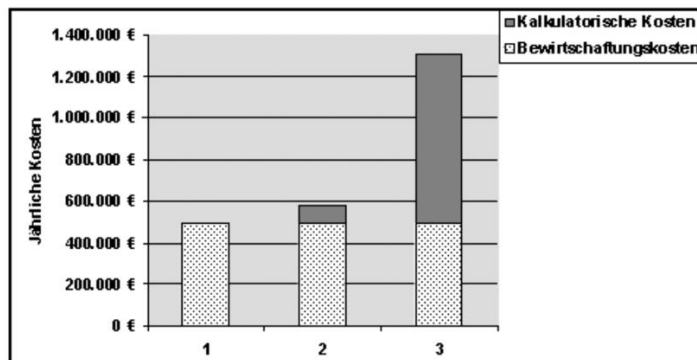
Figure 8. Impact of the privatization bill based on Bethanien's main building. Source: "A new concept for Bethanien" document, 2006

The citizens' working on the economic issue, including some economists, identified a method to avoid the "indirect costs" associated with property management. This approach demonstrated that a self-financed project for the self-management of the Bethanien could be feasible. By establishing a third-party entity to manage the property on behalf of the public administration, Bethanien could be transformed into a "cost-free" property, effectively addressing the main justification for privatization. In the section 4.3 ("Ownership Model") of the document "A new concept for Bethanien", the IZB proposed managing the South wing through a non-profit association:

> It would support, on the one hand, professionally handling the finance issues, management of revenues, balance, and proper expenditures and, on the other hand, the implementation of renewal, maintenance, conservation, and modernization measures". (Bfa 1)

An administrative higher organisational structure would be required to define the management framework for Bethanien's South wing, similar to what is needed when signing a lease agreement. This would ensure that the new management model can be supported both by the skills of the users working in Bethanien's South wing and by the participation of the tenants and users.

The negotiation with the borough concluded with the approval of the project proposed by the active citizens, facilitated by the implementation of a zero-cost management model, which relieved the public administration of nearly all the management costs for the property:

> The Bethanien occupation and the beginning of the campaign against its privatization coincided with an institutional discussion about the legitimacy to keep selling so many public properties. While the debate emerged few years later on the Media Spree urban conflict, focused more on urban planning, participation, and on the critic to the city policies which are dictated by private investors, the Bethanien discussion was rather a discussion about how we want to manage public estate. (KFBA 1)

In 2009, the not-for-profit Society for Urban Development, Trustee of Berlin (GSE GmbH), became the owner and managing body of the building lifting the administration of the "indirect"

costs imposed on public properties. That same year, the not-for-profit association *Südflügel e.V.* (Bethanien South wing) was established, comprising all the entities that autonomously manage the South wing (New Yorck "public space", the theatre, the nursery, the kindergarten, the school of alternative medicine, the artists' workshops). The *Südflügel e.V.* entered into a 15-years lease agreement with the Society for Urban Development (GSE), officially taking over the management of the South wing. The agreement requires *Südflügel e.V.* to cover the maintenance expenses for the building, ensure compliance with current regulations, and pay a quite affordable rent to GSE. In a recent interview to one of the tenants (2023), they expressed confidence that the contract will be renovated for other 15 years after its expiration in 2024, particularly given the district government's ongoing support for their project.

The *Südflügel e.V.* brings together various entities under its legal framework, including the *Kreuzberg North children's daycare* group, the Healer School, the Association of Theatre *Alliance Druzhba e.V.*, the *New Yorck Emancipatory Space* project, and three feminist bureaus. The theatre, children's and medical schools, ateliers and workspaces are attended by a diverse group of individuals, mostly from the neighbourhood. The *New Yorck* project includes a *Hausprojekt* housing approximately 30 residents from various countries, occasionally including children. During the period of participant observation, tenants originated from Germany, Italy, Spain and Cameroon. Some residents are temporary, while others are permanent tenants. The rent is fixed at a rate significantly lower than current market prices in the area. Additionally, the *New Yorck* space includes a "public space" that is attended by people of various nationalities involved in local political groups, such as anti-gentrification or pro-refugee rights groups. The space also organises an Anarchist info-cafè and a borderless kitchen event called People's Kitchen, which provides free meals for many people every week. Last but not least, the space offers an anarchist library with a great collection of books.

Since spring 2008, a group of local residents established a neighbourhood garden in a corner of the public green area surrounding the Bethanien complex. Following discussions about the transformation of the Bethanien park's free areas, the district council allocated 2.100 square meters of green space behind the Bethanien North wing to this group. This led to the formation of a garden association cooperating with the district office.

Conclusions

Since the 1990s, Berlin's urban agenda has been shaped by competition-driven and gentrification-friendly strategies, reinforced by austerity rhetoric legitimizing privatization. This case study demonstrates how resistance to privatization can reveal alternative pathways for managing the shrinking of public spaces and services—challenging the idea that such measures are inevitable, and instead exposing them as political choices rooted in dominant narratives of efficiency and fiscal sustainability.

The tensions between grassroots actors and formal institutions highlight the complexities of integrating bottom-up demands into urban policy. While reclaiming public spaces fosters radical approaches to degrowth, community-led governance, and self-management, these efforts are not immune to co-optation. Informal actors engaging in co-production risk becoming instruments of cost-efficiency rather than agents of systemic transformation. Yet, this case shows how grassroots initiatives can successfully contest dominant power structures by operationalizing horizontal subsidiarity, where community-driven management replaces the logic of privatization with forms of collective care and responsibility.

Importantly, the Bethanien case illustrates how the radical appropriation of symbolic public space can prompt the re-politicization of urban land use and ownership. By securing legal

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recognition and public property assignment through an intermediary cooperative (GSE), citizen collectives were able to implement a form of self-management that not only reduced public spending but also expanded access to community-based activities—housing, cultural production, education, and political organizing. In this way, the initiative avoided the sale of public property while offering the municipality a fair and functional governance model.

Such re-appropriated spaces have demonstrated in recent years a programmatic and proactive capacity to generate "Public Policies from the Bottom". These include microcredit systems, educational programs, circular economy initiatives, housing and gender policies, immigration support, and architectural heritage regeneration. Their effectiveness is especially pronounced in contexts where local governments face fiscal austerity and shrinking welfare capacity. In these cases, bottom-up practices offer viable alternatives to the privatization of public spaces and the dismantling of public services.

Rather than relying on rapid economic growth, these initiatives propose governance models rooted in solidarity, social justice, and sustainability. They counter speculative urban agendas by offering low-cost, community-centered alternatives that serve both local needs and fiscal logic. While some practices risk being absorbed by neoliberal discourses like the "Big Society" or social entrepreneurship, the Bethanien case shows how cooperative, democratic management of public assets can become a structural and enduring strategy, not merely a reactive or symbolic one.

Urban development strategies are always shaped by contingency, socio-material interaction, and distributed agency. In this light, grassroots movements defending the right to the city and the urban commons offer a compelling framework for rethinking planning priorities beyond growth imperatives. They illustrate how degrowth-oriented strategies, grounded in forms of subsidiarity between formal and informal actors, can foster autonomy, reduce structural dependencies, and open space for inclusive, sustainable, and transformative public policy innovation. Recognizing and formalizing these forms of co- and self-management may thus represent a crucial step toward developing just, democratic, and economically sound alternatives to privatization in cities facing crisis and austerity.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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