Dimensions of Architectural Knowledge, 2024-08
https://doi.org/10.14361/dak-2024-0804

Counter Architectures of Sex Work. Collective Care Networks and their Spatial Productions along Potsdamer Straße in West Berlin in the 1980s

Beverly Engelbrecht

Abstract: This article explores the spatial strategies and practices of sex workers on Potsdamer Straße in West Berlin during the 1980s through the lens of Ewa Majewska's concept of »weak resistance«. It argues that sex workers, operating under conditions of legal marginalization and patriarchal violence, developed ephemeral, informal, and collective spatial practices that produced what I term »counter architectures of sex work.« These spatial productions – marked by improvisation, transience, and mutual care – challenged dominant distinctions between »public« and »private,« »intimate,« and »distanced« space. Based on architectural analysis, archival materials, interviews, photographs, and an artistic drawing, the study frames the street as both a site of exploitation and a terrain of feminist resistance. The article highlights how »collective care networks« emerged as vital forms of everyday, non-heroic resistance that enabled sex workers to survive, protect one another, and assert agency. It also reveals the limits of such self-organization in the face of pimp hierarchies. Ultimately, the text contributes to a feminist discourse on urban space by reclaiming the practices of marginalized actors as foundational to alternative modes of spatial production.

Keywords: Spatial Production of Sex Workers; Collective Care Networks; Weak Resistance of Marginalized Groups; Counter Architectures of Sex Work; West Berlin.

Corresponding author: Beverly Engelbrecht (Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, Germany); beverly.engelbrecht@uni-weimar.de; beverlyengelbrecht@posteo.de; https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5459-6208;
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Introduction

With the concept of »weak resistance,« the cultural philosopher Ewa Majewska provided a concept that will serve as the basis for my investigations into the spatial strategies and practices of sex workers in the context of the street prostitution scene of Potsdamer Straße in West Berlin in the 1980s.[1,2] Majewska sees this form of disobedience, that I would like to apply to the spatial productions of sex workers, »as an alternative to the predominantly straight and masculine notions of heroic activism dominating our political imaginary (Majewska 2021: 5–6).« She thus understands »weak resistance« as »other« – i.e. as a contrast to the hegemonic practices of the white, Western, male, heterosexual, and privileged (cf. Majewska 2021: 146–147). »Weak resistance« manifests itself in ordinary, everyday, and communal actions, which in some cases would merely mean persistence and survival, but could often also cause subversion, rejection, and transformation of existing norms (cf. Majewska 2021: 5–6, 146–147) – »those publics or groups that form and organize through mutual recognition of wider public exclusions so as to overcome those exclusions (Majewska 2021: 1).«

In this article, I will examine the spatial strategies and practices of »collective care networks« among sex workers along Potsdamer Straße in West Berlin during the 1980s, to discuss how this marginalized group produced space. I argue that these strategies served as forms of resistance against hostile policies, exploitation, and both male and structural violence. Consequently, I understand the street prostitution of Potsdamer Straße and the spatial productions manifesting there as an example of a feminist building culture of the precarious group of sex workers, in which dynamics of socio-political exclusion and invisibilization in space overlap with practices of informal and fluid appropriation. In this context, I would like to introduce the concept of »counter architectures of sex work« as spatial strategies and practices of marginalized people in the urban field. I argue that these »counter architectures« question norms in architectural production

1 The term »sex work« was coined by sex worker and activist Carol Leigh and is intended to clarify that the exchange of a sexual service for resources (money, drugs, accommodation, etc.) is work.

2 I deal with sex work as criminalized, marginalized, and moralized, based on the close intertwining of economic necessity, affective work, and sexuality. As a result, sex workers in urban areas were and are often only (temporarily) tolerated and exposed to violence and exploitation.

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of space and thus also classifications of modernity, such as »private« and »public« or »intimate« and »distanced« – and therefore, »move away from the status quo still centered around modernism, growth, resource consumption, tangible elements and technical solutions (Baxi et al. 2024: 1).« »Counter architectures« thus encompass deviant spaces allowing ambivalences and overlapping spatial categories. I also suppose that these architectures are characterized by a high degree of temporality and precariousness and that, in this respect, various constitutions and diverse transformations of these spaces can be revealed. Last, they represent segregated spaces, i.e. counter places amid socially legitimized places, whose delimitations and interferences with normalized architectures I will examine (cf. Foucault 2021: 9ff.). In this respect, I share the view of space as »reaching beyond the physical space, including social and action related spatial constellations, political spaces, ecological environments (Baxi et al. 2024: 1).«

So, how can spaces of sex work be described using the example of the Potsdamer Straße? In what way do the strategies and practices of sex workers materialize spatially, and to what extent do they intertwine with the concept of »weak resistance« as a strategy against violence and exploitation?

Methodological Reflection

This article is a deductive-inductive research project (theoretical-empirical) from the perspective of architecture, which also utilizes interdisciplinary positions (including sociology and philosophy). To obtain different perspectives on the spatial productions of sex workers on the Potsdamer Straße in the 1980s, which serves as a case study, I use a combination of different qualitative data methods (analyses of literature and archive documents), which I evaluate in a synthesis-forming process. I also make use of artistic forms of design as epistemic instruments for my descriptions – more precisely, a map with Potsdamer Straße at its center (fig. 1), photographs showing spatial productions on the street (figs. 2, 3, 4), and a drawing, showing spaces appropriated by the sex worker Roberta (fig. 5). I used these forms of design to draw conclusions about specific (precarious) forms of spatial production that a purely text-based work would not have made possible. As an architect, the medium of drawing is important to me in order to question norms in architectural production. In this way, the drawing combines different scales, textures, colors, and, at the same time, elaborates the essence of the spaces and spatial

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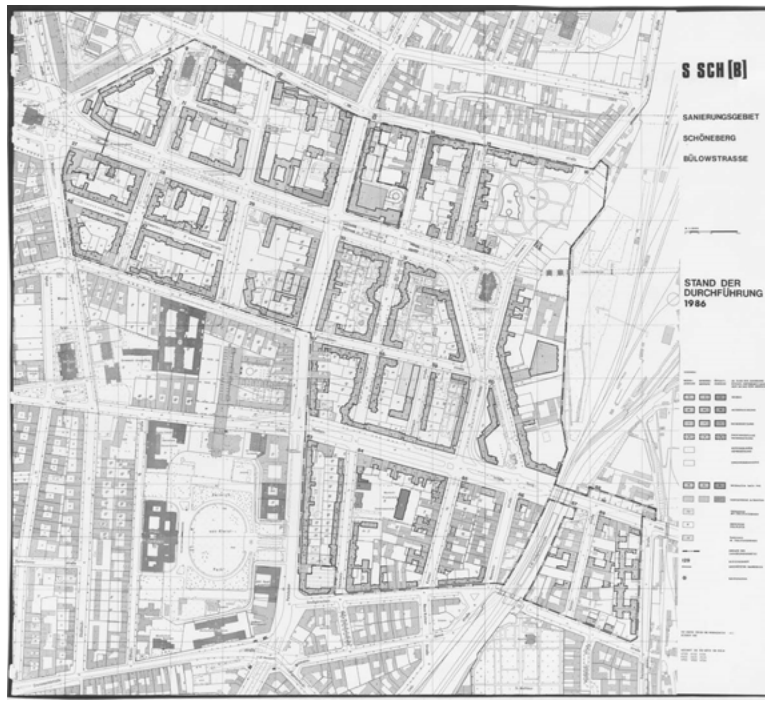

1.
Map with Potsdamer Straße in the center, 1986. Der Senator für Bau- und Wohnungswesen IV C. (ibid.) »S SCH (B) Sanierungsgebiet Schöneberg Bülowstrasse Stand der Durchführung.« Landesarchiv Berlin, Germany, B Rep. 016 (maps), Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung, serial no.: 279/Bl. 1.

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2.
Street scene along Potsdamer Straße, 1983. Schneider, Günter (ibid.): »Handwerk und Gewerbe; Lotterie- und Wettwesen; Spielkasino ›Royal, Potsdamer Straße (Schöneberg)‹.« Landesarchiv Berlin, Germany, F Rep. 290-02-15, collection Günter Schneider, serial no.: 0254164.

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3.
Interaction between a sex worker and a customer sitting in a car, 1980. Siegmann, Horst (ibid.): »Handwerk und Gewerbe; Prostitution; Straßenprostitution; Bülowstraße (Schöneberg),« Landesarchiv Berlin, Germany, F Rep. 290 (03) no. 0228865.

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4.
Sex workers laboring in a group on Potsdamer Straße, 1983. Schneider, Günter (ibid.): »Handwerk und Gewerbe; Lotterie- und Wettwesen; Spielcasino ›Hotel Potsdam‹, Potsdamer Straße 156 (Schöneberg).« Landesarchiv Berlin, Germany, F Rep. 290-02-15 no. 0254165.

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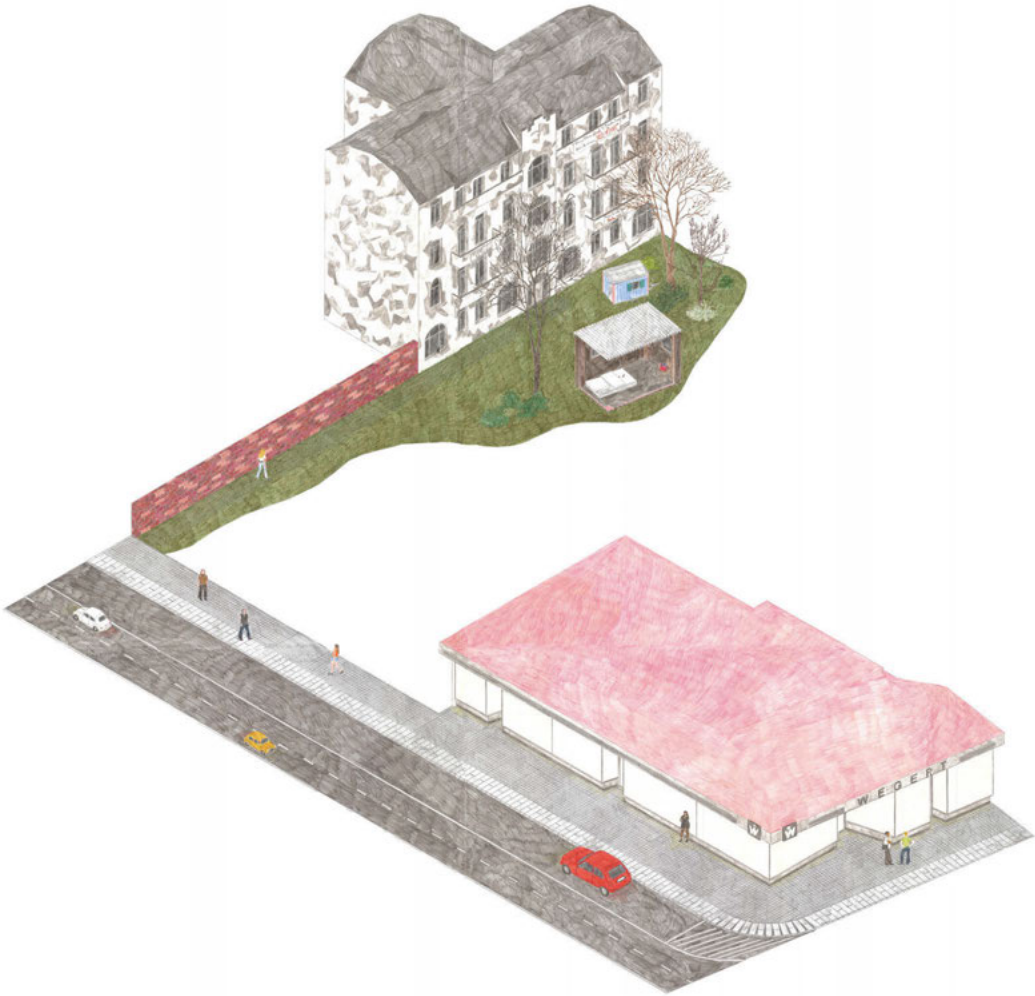

5.
The spaces appropriated by the trans sex worker Roberta, 1980. Engelbrecht, Beverly 2025.

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relationships. In this context, the format of drawing allows for ambivalence and not-knowing. It undermines linear thinking and creates visual counter-narratives to dominant, often patriarchal representations. In its openness, it can make marginalized perspectives visible and convey complex social realities in a sensual, immediate way. Drawings also have the ability to make the spatial productions of marginalized people visible and thus become part of their narratives. This highlights their potential not only as analytical tools, but as political and epistemic interventions within spatial discourse.

My contribution can be categorized as »interpretative interactionism«: »as an interpretative style of postmodernism that aims to make problematic life experiences accessible to readers in their cultural and social contextualization (Winter 2011: 10, author's translation).«[3] Following the basic principles, I situate the subjects (sex workers) historically and socially by examining the conditions that led to them having specific experiences (cf. ibid.: 9f.). In addition to the sex workers' personal stories, my research also focuses on analyses of planning and map material as well as photographs. To depict the perspectives of the sex workers, I analyze written interviews secondarily. For this, I utilize the magazines of the »Hydra Nachtexpress. Zeitung für Bar, Bordell und Bordstein,« which were published by representatives of the »whore movement« Hydra in (West) Berlin and depict the voices of sex workers from 1980 to 1995 (cf. Heying 2019: 75f.). I also found two publications with written interviews with sex workers in the archive of the »Schwules Museum« in Berlin – »Strichjungen-Gespräche«, which was conducted by the research team of Norbert Schmidt-Relenberg, Hartmut Kärner and Richard Pieper around 1975 in Hamburg in the context of queer sex work, and »An der Front des Patriachats«, which was carried out by Rose-Marie Giesen and Gunda Schumann in Berlin at the end of the 1970s (Schmidt-Relenberg et al. ibid.; Giesen/Schumann 1980). In addition, I use excerpts from the publication »Revolting Prostitutes« by sex workers and activists Juno Mac and Molly Smith (ibid. 2020), reports by sex workers in the context of the archive »Objects of Desire,«[4] observations and interviews from the publication »Licht- und Schattenseiten« by the authors Monika

3 »[A]ls einen interpretativen Stil der Postmoderne, der Lesenden problematische Lebenserfahrungen in ihrer kulturellen und sozialen Kontextualisierung zugänglich machen möchte (Winter 2011: 10).«

4 In 2019, the collective »Objects of Desire« interviewed over 40 sex workers in Berlin about objects that were significant to their work in order to reveal everyday, unspectacular stories beyond stereotypical representations (cf. OoD 2019a: n.p.).

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Savier, Rita Eichelkraut, Andrea Simon, and Birgit Cramon-Daiber (ibid. 1987), as well as accounts by the city chronicler Willi Proeger in »Stätten der Berliner Prostitution« (ibid. 1930). To reconstruct the street spatially, I looked at plan material at the »Bauarchiv im Bezirksamt Tempelhof-Schöneberg« in Berlin. I also found maps and photographs in the »Landesarchiv Berlin« that showed the street. I contextualize the stories and analyses by placing other written texts and discourses in relation to them (cf. Winter 2011: 9f.). More specifically, I use newspaper articles that I found on Potsdamer Straße in the archive of »Museen Tempelhof-Schöneberg,« as well as brochures, correspondence, and newspaper articles collected by »Hydra« and kept in »das feministische Archiv FFBIZ.« Majweksa's »weak resistance« (ibid. 2021) also serves as a theoretical framework from which I examine spatial productions of resistance. I also use the concepts of »performativity« by philosopher and social scientist Judith Butler and »heteronormativity« (ibid. 2002) by cultural theorist Lauren Berlant and theorist and historian Michael Warner (ibid. 1998).

Potsdamer Straße as One of the Spatial Centers of the Sex Trade in West Berlin

Alongside Kurfürstendamm and Straße des 17. Juni, Potsdamer Straße was one of three central streets used for sex work in the western part of divided Berlin in the 1980s. Unlike other large West German cities, West Berlin was not spatially regulated by »restricted areas,« which meant that sex work was possible everywhere (cf. H N 1992/1993: 64). The three streets were centrally located on boulevards and easily accessible (cf. P H 1988: 210f.; cf. Künkel 2020: 230). While Kurfürstendamm was touristy and sex work mainly took place there at night, Straße des 17. Juni was used for sexual services in cars. Potsdamer Straße, on the contrary, was known for all-day street prostitution in front of hotels and guesthouses (cf. P H: 210f.).

During industrialization, the former elegant boulevard of the 19th century, where artists lived and frequented, was transformed into a commercial street with links to the sex trade. In the middle of the 19th century, the stately front houses of Potsdamer Straße were densified and new buildings – including more precarious forms of housing known as »Mietskasernen« – were erected, while at the same time the infrastructure changed with an elevated railroad. With the spatial transformation, the bourgeoisie moved

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further westward, while more and more actors in the sex trade established themselves in the area (cf. Jäkl 1987: title page, 14f., 49).

At the beginning of the 1970s, the section was characterized by its dense development; multistory buildings were built right up to the sidewalk, creating an urban atmosphere. The buildings themselves were heterogeneous. Some of the buildings date back to the Wilhelminian era, including several prestigious listed residential and commercial buildings (cf. Husse et al. 2018: 107–110, 132). Most of them were in a dilapidated condition after the bombings of Second World War, and some were derelict (cf. Jäkl 1987: 86). The (West) Berlin Senate at the time reacted to the situation by attempting to upgrade inner-city districts that were considered underdeveloped (»rückständig«), initially in the form of »area redevelopment« (»Flächensanierung«) and later, »object redevelopment« (»Objektsanierung«) – i.e. by demolishing existing buildings and building residential complexes that were considered »modern.« One of these areas was the »Sanierungsgebiet Schöneberg Bülowstraße,« the center of which was Potsdamer Straße (fig. 1). However, this urban renewal policy led to speculation, vacancies, and social resistance: from the mid-1970s, numerous tenants' and squatters' initiatives emerged to defend themselves against this urban planning, which was perceived as destructive. At the end of the 1970s, Potsdamer Straße became one of the focal points of the first wave of the (West) Berlin »Häuserkampf.« Squats took place almost daily, which were to be prevented by a massive police presence and the evacuation of houses. A conflict arose between squatters on the one hand and the Berlin Senate and (brutal) police intervention on the other. Eventually, the Senate began to negotiate with individual groups using the »Treuhandmodell,« splitting the movement. Ultimately, 105 of 165 squats were legalized by 1984; the rest were evicted (cf. Kuhn 2014: 69-84; cf. Savier et al. 1987: 44ff.). The renovations were thus enforced in the following years, so that existing buildings with dilapidated structures were increasingly demolished by »Neue Heimat,« a German non-profit construction and housing company commissioned by the Berlin Senate to carry out the renovations (cf. ARGE Sozialplanung 1994: 9; cf. Kuhn 2014: 71–79). With the changes in the street, authorities, banks, and stores successively settled in the southern part of Potsdamer Straße and a business center emerged (cf. Opprower 1957: n.p.; cf. Sontheimer 1991: n.p.).

Around 1980, the actors on Potsdamer Strasse were characterized by the coexistence of different groups and milieus. Alongside the various residents of the district, businesspeople, and employees were prostitutes and their

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customers, pimps, and operators of establishments associated with the sex trade. This coexistence can also be described in its spatial manifestations: In addition to residential buildings of various scales, banks, government offices, and bourgeois stores (jewelers, specialist bookshops, and fur stores), different restaurants and takeaways (from »Ellis Bratpfanne« to kebab stores) were lined up alongside various amusement businesses such as casinos and nightclubs, and numerous video stores. Sex department stores also opened next to the sex trade establishments (cf. Jäkl 1987: 86; cf. Markert/Nägele 2011: 205–206). As the image by photographer Günter Schneider shows, boards, signs, and lettering of various sizes – some of which protruded into the street space – drew attention to the many bars, clubs, and hotels (fig. 2). In this context, the lighting infrastructure played a key role: Unlike the adjacent side streets, Potsdamer Straße was also brightly lit at night (OS 1985: n.p.; cf. Savier et al. 1987: 41, 61). In addition to the boards, signs, and lettering, different colored light bulbs flashed, framing windows with (visible) references to the sex trade (cf. Savier et al. 1987: 52–53). Further down, on the first floor, shop windows that had formerly advertised the latest goods were covered with velvet – some of them hung with photographs of sex workers who worked in the establishment (cf. Härlin/Sontheimer 1983: 13). The actors in the sex trade thus appropriated buildings that were not built by architects for prostitution. To this end, managers of bars, clubs, and hotels, as well as pimps, marked their spatial claims by making the street space legible as belonging to the red-light district with advertising boards, flashing lights, and display cases. The sex workers themselves did not make any invasive spatial adaptations: In most cases, they were assigned spaces by managers and pimps. When sex workers transformed spaces, these adaptations were characterized by a greater degree of transience. They moved garbage cans in backyards or used the advantages of shop windows, as shown below.[5]

5 The implementation of the »Sanierungsgebiet Schöneberg Bülowstraße« led to gentrification processes: Higher-income residents displaced established milieus and organized themselves against sex work (e.g., in the »Anwohnerinitiative Lützowstraße«) (e.g. cf. BLZ 1998; cf. ARGE Sozialplanung 1994: 36f., 42, 55). The redevelopment company »Neue Heimat« also refused to rent to the sex industry, which exacerbated the conflicts (cf. TAZ 1988: n.p.). As a result, sex work shifted to Potsdamer Straße and side streets. Despite police orders to leave, sex workers returned again and again, defending their claims to space in the long term (e.g. cf. H N 1995: 26, e.g. cf. Künkel 2020: 108-149)

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Spatial Productions of Sex Workers on Potsdamer Straße

The term street sex work initially refers to the place where contact is made: »The prostitutes stand on the side of the road and wait for clients, who usually drive past in a car, stop and choose a [sex worker] to get into the car with them (Feige 2003: 626, author's translation).«[6] Waiting and making contact was visible for bystanders, which made the prostitutes particularly vulnerable. More precisely, waiting meant for sex workers standing on the sidewalk or under canopies, leaning against (house) walls, sitting on chairs in entrances, or walking up and down the sidewalk (cf. Savier et al. 1987: 53–54; cf. Markert/Nägele 2011: 205–206). The trans sex worker Roberta, for example, as can be seen on the drawing (fig. 5) stood

> »[O]n the parking strip in front of Foto-Wegert, on the corner of Kurfürstenstraße; she uses the bright light of the display, in which matt black and silver SLR cameras, hi-fi towers and other marvels of home electronics gleam, to illuminate her charms (Härlin/Sontheimer 1983: 88, author's translation).«[7]

A picture taken by photographer Horst Siegmann (see fig. 3) shows the following contact between a sex worker and a customer on Bülowstraße: The photograph depicts a car stopped in the driver's lane; a sex worker leans over the open door on the passenger side and interacts with the customer. During the interaction between the sex worker and the client, agreements were made on the price, type, and location of the sexual act. If both agreed, they drove together to the place of service.[8] A plausible assumption is that they usually used one of the many hotels and guesthouses along Potsdamer Straße or the

6 »Die Prostituierten stehen am Straßenrand und warten auf Freier, die in der Regel im Auto vorbeigefahren kommen, anhalten und sich eine [Sexarbeiterin] aussuchen, die zu ihnen ins Auto steigt (Feige 2003: 626).«

7 »Auf dem Parkstreifen vor Foto-Wegert, Ecke Kurfürstenstraße; sie nutzt das helle Licht der Auslage, in dem matt schwarz und silbern Spiegelreflex-Kameras, Hifi-Türme und andere Wunderwerke der Heimelektronik glänzen, zur Beleuchtung ihrer Reize (Härlin/Sontheimer 1983: 88).«

8 When sex workers were approached by pedestrians, the process of making contact was quite similar: The pedestrian stopped and spoke to the sex worker or vice versa. A plausible assumption is that this was followed by agreements on the price, type, and location of the sexual service as well. Sex workers were not dependent on cars coming to a standstill, but addressed potential customers with phrases such as »Hello sweetie, mmh, shh, come here (plu 1981: n.p., author's translation).«

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inside of the car after the sex worker and client had found a more secluded parking lot. The car could also be parked near where the contact was made and both left the location on foot: Roberta, for example, used an empty excavation pit behind the »Foto-Wegert« building. Later, the squatters living in the adjacent building set up a temporary space for her:

> »After lengthy debates, the housing assembly refused to give Roberta and [her circle] the first-floor apartment [of the occupied building] and preferred a daycare center. But at least we built her a small wooden hut in the pit, ›mein Käfisch,‹ as she proudly called it (ibid.: 85–86, author's translation).«[9,10]

She was unable to use the hut permanently, which is why she later appropriated a backyard around 100 meters away from her regular spot (cf. ibid.: 88) until she finally had to move to an underground car park (cf. Sontheimer 1991: n.p.). The city chronicler Willi Pröger also reported on areas in backyards partitioned off with garbage cans, which were used for sexual acts at the beginning of the century and certainly even later:

> »Around 11 o'clock in the evening […] a woman approaches me. […] To the obligatory question: ›Where?‹, the woman replies: 'A few houses away. We leave. The heavy woman unlocks a front building and leads me into a courtyard. Into a corner formed by piles of garbage cans. Sexual intercourse in the open, in the dark (ibid. 1930: 31f, author's translation).« [11]

This example illustrates the ambivalent character of the »counter-architectures«: Although the backyard appears spatially as »open,« it is at the same

9 »Roberta und den ihren die Parterrewohnung [des besetzten Hauses] zu überlassen lehnte die Hausversammlung zwar nach längeren Debatten ab und zog ihnen einen Kinderladen vor. Aber immerhin bauten wir ihr in der Grube eine kleine Bretterbude, ›meine Käfisch,‹ wie sie ihn voll Besitzerstolz nannte (Härlin/Sontheimer 1983: 85f.).«

10 As the example shows, there were brief alliances between sex workers and squatters that later dissipated. However, sex workers also acted as squatters themselves. Together with the self-help project »Hydra« and other women's groups, they renovated a building on Potsdamer Straße, which they left a few years later (cf. Engelbrecht 2025: 50–61).

11 »Gegen 11 Uhr abends spricht mich […] eine Frau an. […] Auf die obligate Frage: ›Wo‹, antwortet die Frau: ›N' paar Häuser weiter.‹ Wir gehen. Die dicke schließt ein Vorderhaus auf, führt mich in einen Hof. In eine Ecke, gebildet durch aufeinandergetürmte Mülleimer. Geschlechtsverkehr im Freien, im Dunkel' (Proeger 1930: 31f.).«

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time partially shielded by informal, improvised boundaries – those of the garbage cans. The openness of the space is therefore not to be understood in the sense of public accessibility or complete visibility, but rather as a spatial transition zone in which »public« and »private« are blurred. The stacked garbage cans created a temporary, functional shelter. Sex workers also possessed keys to buildings adjacent to street prostitution areas to use the hallways for their services. In this context, Proeger described scenes that could have taken place on Potsdamer Straße using the example of another sex worker:

> »On ›good‹ days (Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays) […] at least half a dozen courtyards and corridors are busy. And the prostitutes have keys to these houses, even though they don't live there! ›Money doesn't stink!‹ says the porter or some resident and sells a house key (ibid.: 72f, author's translation).«[12]

The »private« space that was originally attributed to the residents of a building only was thus overlaid by the uses of sex workers.

The examples show how, due to their historical criminalization and marginalization, sex workers appropriated and defended the spaces less actively, but rather passively, provisionally, and temporarily in the sense of »weak resistance.« They also fluidly changed the spaces they used for sexual intercourse and thus adapted to the frequently changing spatial conditions. At the same time, I read the sex workers' spatial productions, such as Roberta's, as persistent: she constantly seeks out new spaces. Displacement seems to be part of her everyday life. In addition, the sex workers' spatial awareness of the street space is remarkable. They used the advantages of the »public« street space, such as the brightly lit displays of department stores, to stage themselves. I see these places, which were used to buy and sell sex and deviated from social morals and heteronormative norms, as »counter architectures« because the sex workers added a new layer to the street space without changing it. After all, the space was not built by an architect for sex work, but rather appropriated and occupied by actors in the sex trade. Thus, the meanings of the buildings and the space in between, which were

12 »An ›guten‹ Tagen (Freitags, Sonnabends und Sonntags) ist […] mindestens einem halben Dutzend Höfen und Hausfluren reger ›Absteige-Betrieb.‹ Und zwar besitzen die Prostituierten zu diesen Häusern Schlüssel, obwohl sie nicht im Hause wohnen! ›Geld stinkt nicht!‹ sagt auch der Portier oder irgendein Bewohner und verkauft einen Hausschlüssel (Proeger 1930: 72f.).«

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intended as residential buildings, stores, offices, or restaurants, overlap with the uses by sex workers and their customers.

The sex workers used one place to contact clients and another for sexual acts, as well as a space connecting the two. While in the vocabulary of modern architectural production, the spaces for establishing contact could be described as »public« on the one hand and the spaces for sexual services as »private« on the other, a closer look reveals the ambivalences of such spatial attributions. This is because the contact between sex worker and client was »private«, but at the same time took place in a »public« place. The sexual services involved »distanced« acts between two strangers, which were nevertheless »intimate,« in spaces that were more »private« than the street space of Potsdamer Straße, but were often provisional, partially visible, and usually accessible at a low threshold. The transition to the site of the sexual act was usually marked by a spatial threshold, such as the garbage cans in the courtyard or the door to the »Bretterbude.«

The form and conditions of work were also social, political, and therefore of »public« relevance. As philosopher and social scientist Judith Butler argues:

> »The personal is thus implicitly political as much as it is conditioned by shared social structures, but the personal has also been immunized against political challenge to the extent that public/private distinctions endure. For feminist theory, then, the personal becomes an expansive category, one which accommodates, if only implicitly, political structures usually viewed as public. Indeed, the very meaning of the political expands as well (ibid. 1988: 522f.).«[13]

In addition, cultural theorist Lauren Berlant and theorist and historian Michael Warner discuss in their essay »Sex in Public« (1998) that sexuality is largely made invisible in heteronormative »public« life or contained in institutional forms such as marriage and family. Street prostitution, on the other hand, makes sexuality visible as an economic transaction, and is often perceived as a threat to this social order: »[H]eteronormativity is

13 »Somit ist das Persönliche implizit insoweit politisch, als es durch gemeinsame gesellschaftliche Strukturen bedingt ist, aber das Persönliche wurde auch so weitgehend gegen politische Herausforderungen immunisiert, daß Unterscheidungen von öffentlich und privat weiter fortbestehen. Für die feministische Theorie wird das Persönliche dann eine umfassende Kategorie, die, wenn auch nur implizit, politische Strukturen mit umschließt, die gewöhnlich als öffentlich betrachtet werden. In der Tat erweitert sich hier auch die Bedeutung des Politischen (Butler 2002: 307).«

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a fundamental motor of social organization […], a founding condition of unequal and exploitative relations throughout even straight society (ibid.: 564).« As a result, the »counter architectures« appropriated by sex workers are perceived as deviating from social norms. I also understand waiting, making contact, walking together to the location of the sexual acts and the sexual service itself as »performative acts« and thus as »public.« In this context, Butler writes:

> »Applying this conception of social performance to gender, it is clear that the ›action‹ is also directly public, although it is individual bodies that enact the meanings by stylizing themselves in gendered ways« (ibid.: 312f, author's translation).[14]

Butler also makes it clear that »gender performances […] are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions (ibid.: 527).«[15] This is particularly clear in the queer context, where the initiation of contact was less visible. The sex worker Andreas, for example, describes it as follows:

> »Yes, when a gay man walks past, he looks at him first. Not from up close, but from a bit further away. He always looks at him like he's looking in a shop window […]. Then he looks at the boy first to see if he wants to earn some money. And when he has looked at him, he usually speaks to him (Schmidt-Relenberg et al. 1975: 182, author's translation).« [16]

The contacting of male sex workers, who addressed a male audience, thus differed fundamentally from the activities of female sex workers, who solicited male clients, as the criminal offence of homosexuality meant that clients

14 »WendetmandieseKonzeptiondersozialenPerformanzaufdieGeschlechterzugehörigkeit an, so ist deutlich, daß die ›Aktion‹ auch unmittelbar öffentlich ist, obgleich einzelne Körper es sind, die die Bedeutungen inszenieren, indem sie sich geschlechtsspezifisch stilisieren (Butler 2002: 312f.).«

15 »Geschlechter-Inszenierungen […] durch strafende und regulierende gesellschaftliche Konventionen beherrscht (Butler 2002: 313).«

16 »Ja, wenn da son Schwuler längsgeht, der guckt sich den erstmal an. Nicht so von der Nähe, sondern n bißchen weiter von so nem Abstand. Da guckt er immer so hin, als wenn er in n Schaufenster guckt[…]. Dann guckt er den Jungen erstmal an, ob der nich n bißchen Geld verdienen will. Und wenn er sich den angeguckt hat, dann spricht er ihn auch meistens an (Schmidt-Relenberg et al 1975: 182).«

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and sex workers could not be recognized by outsiders (cf. Schmidt-Relenberg et al. 1975: 179f.). While sex work in West Berlin was legally regulated by the verdict of »immorality« and was spatially restricted in various laws, queer sex work was made almost invisible in the »public« space as a criminal offense.[17] Heterosexual intimacy is thus considered the norm, while queer sexuality has been criminalized as disruptive or inappropriate. In this context, the trans sex worker Roberta also had to be legible as »female« to be able to offer services in the »public« street space. And yet she was left with less popular and more vulnerable places than her cis female colleagues, who usually stood in front of the guesthouses and hotels that were considered popular.

The sex workers who worked on Potsdamer Straße changed shifts once a day. In this context, Carola explains the spatial organization:

> »The women who work there at night, I believe, have [no financial] […] problems. They usually have pimps or are lucky enough to know someone from the clique. So, we, the women who work there during the day, have the biggest problems. We have to clear the street for the ›professionals‹ (as they call themselves) by 8 pm at the latest. We ›day women‹ are either drug addicts, foreigners, or simply women without certain connections (H C 1980: 11, author's translation).«[18]

The sex workers and third parties, such as pimps, thus organized the space through territorial and price agreements in which vulnerable groups were particularly marginalized. Carola's comment shows that solidarity behavior between sex workers runs along the lines of race, class, drug use, gender identity, and other (potential) exclusionary factors.

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17 Section 175 of the Criminal Code (»§ 175 Strafgesetzbuch«) was defused in 1969, so that sex between men over the age of 21 was no longer punishable (cf. Arolsen n.d.: n.p.). However, homosexual prostitution remained punishable until the 4th Criminal Law Amendment Act (»4. Strafrechtsänderungsgesetz«) in 1973 (cf. LSVD n.d.: n.p.). With this amendment, the age of consent for male homosexuality was also set at 18 (cf. ibid.). The paragraph was not completely abolished until 1994 (cf. Arolsen n.d.: n.p.).

18 »Die Frauen, die dort nachts arbeiten, haben, so glaube ich, [keine finanziellen] […] Probleme. Dafür haben sie meist Zuhälter oder das Glück, jemanden aus der Clique zu kennen. Wir, die Frauen die dort am Tag arbeiten, haben also die größten Schwierigkeiten. Um 20 Uhr müssen wir die Straße spätestens für die 'Profis' räumen (wie sie sich selbst bezeichnen). Wir ›Tagfrauen‹ sind entweder drogenabhängig, Ausländerinnen oder einfach Frauen ohne gewisse Beziehungen (H C 1980: 11).«

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In addition, the descriptions of one of the authors of the publication »Licht- und Schattenseiten« (1987) show that the sex workers had fixed locations and formed alliances with other sex workers by working together in small groups: »Right on the corner are Turkish transvestites, a small heavy man and a huge thin man. They always seem to work together. At least I've always seen them together. This corner is their ›location‹ (Savier et al. ibid.: 32, author's translation).«[19] And later on: »Fifty meters further along Potsdamer Straße are two German prostitutes. They belong to the professionals, the long-established, accepted women who have characterized the streetscape for years (ibid., author's translation).«[20] The image by photographer Günter Schneider also shows several white sex workers waiting for customers in the entrance area of a hotel on Potsdamer Straße (fig. 4). They are certainly also working together. Such alliances were often only temporary due to the dynamic developments in the sex trade (cf. H N 1981: 7–10; cf. Savier et al. 1987: 43–44). The sex worker Kim described the spatial strategies and practices during the study period as follows:

> »But I usually kept my working hours, until 4 o'clock. I found it easiest when I had two new friends on the street, one next to me and one opposite. We got on really well. […] The motivation to go to work was much better because each of us knew that the other would be there too (H N 1981: 7, author's translation).«[21]

Resident Ms. E. also confirmed Kim's statements: »Well, if one of them is provoked or something, the others are there straight away. They also talk to each other a lot (Savier et al. 1987: 43–44, author's translation).«[22] From

19 »Gleich an der Ecke stehen türkische Transvestiten, ein kleiner dicker und ein riesiger dünner Mann. Sie arbeiten anscheinend immer zusammen. Ich habe sie jedenfalls immer zusammen gesehen. Diese Ecke ist ihr 'Standort' (Savier et al. ibid.: 32).«

20 »Fünfzig Meter weiter auf der Potsdamer Straße stehen zwei deutsche Prostituierte. Sie gehören zu den Profis, den alteingesessenen akzeptierten Frauen, die das Straßenbild seit Jahren prägen (ibid.).«

21 »Ich hielt aber meistens meine Arbeitszeit ein, bis 4 Uhr. Am leichtesten fiel mir das, als ich auf der Straße zwei neue Freundinnen hatte, eine neben mir und eine gegenüber. Wir verstanden uns ganz prima[.] […] Der Antrieb zum Job hinzugehen war dadurch viel besser, weil jede von uns wußte, daß die andere ja auch da sein würde (H N 1981: 7).«

22 »Also, wenn da einmal eine provoziert wird oder so, dann sind sofort die anderen da. Die reden auch viel miteinander (Savier et al. 1987: 43f.).«

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today's perspective, I would describe such forms of communal trade as »collective care networks« – i.e. alliances between prostitutes. By alliances, I mean loose, often informal associations of sex workers based on mutual support, protection, and solidarity within the »counter architectures.« These alliances aimed to create security and stability in a working environment characterized by competition, control, and social exclusion. They served to observe and warn each other, to intervene in conflict situations, and to provide emotional and practical support. Through this collaboration, sex workers actively appropriated the urban space and turned it – at least temporarily – into a place of mutual care and agency. These alliances are emblematic of the »weak resistance« and have always been common in sex work. Sex workers and activists Juno Mac and Molly Smith, who did not work on Potsdamer Straße, reported on other forms of solidarity and resistance among sex workers.[23] Examples they gave included sharing money, rooms, and clients, looking after children together, and supporting each other in times of need or illness:

> »For example, in nineteenth-century Great Britain and Ireland, prostitutes created communities of mutual aid, sharing income and childcare. Likewise, watembezi [street based] women in colonial-era Nairobi formed financial ties to one another, paying each other's fines or bequeathing assets to one another when they died. Although largely invisible to outsiders, this sharing of resources [...] persists as a significant form of sex worker activism today. Workers often collectively pitch in to prevent an eviction or to offer emergency housing. This kind of community resource-sharing is often the only safety net sex workers have if they're robbed at work or if an assault means they need time off to heal (Mac/Smith 2020: 6).«

Spatial characteristics of this solidarity-based resistance are therefore the »communal« and »intimate« appropriation and use of space beyond the boundaries of the traditional nuclear family – i.e. by groups that are considered more »distant.«

At the same time, relationships among sex workers were characterized by ambivalence. In addition to forms of mutual support, there was also competition, mistrust, and demarcation. Alliances were therefore often

23 The two women are currently working in the UK and are activists with the »Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement« (SWARM) (cf. Verso n.d.a, n.d.b).

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situation-dependent and not always an expression of personal closeness. In this context, sex worker F. described her experiences:

> »I'm friends with one and maybe slightly friends with two, but I have to say ›friends‹ in quotation marks because I understand something completely different by ›private friends‹. I don't think there are any real friendships in prostitution[,] […] because the competition between all the hookers is too intense. The friendship I have with a colleague is such that we meet up outside of work from time to time, and then she tells me her worries and I admire her clothes and, well, she gives me clients and doesn't take anything for it, well, she usually doesn't take anything for it, sometimes, that's something, you can call it being friends (Giesen/Schumann 1980: 175, author's translation).«[24]

In this respect, the sex workers' statements cover a broad spectrum from friendships and temporary alliances to disinterest. Sex workers, therefore, had very individual and contradictory experiences.

The street prostitution on Potsdamer Straße was also characterized by hegemonic power dynamics between actors in the sex trade (pimps and customers). In an internal letter from HWG e. V. Prostituiertenhilfe – a self-help project in Frankfurt am Main – to Hydra in 1997, they informed their colleagues: »Rape, assault, deprivation of liberty, and robbery are offenses that Frankfurt's prostitutes are constantly confronted with (HWG ibid., author's translation).«[25] The letter also described an internal security system among sex workers:

> »It is common practice on the streets that women usually work together with a colleague and look out for each other. The numbers of the client vehicles are

24 »Ich bin schon mit einer richtig befreundet und vielleicht mit zweien noch leicht befreundet, aber ich muß das ›befreundet‹ in Anführungsstriche sagen, weil ich also unter privat befreundet was ganz anderes verstehe. Ich glaube, daß es aufm Strich keine richtigen Freundschaften gibt [,,,], weil die Konkurrenz zu groß ist, die zwischen allen Nutten läuft. Die Freundschaft, die ich zu einer Kollegin hab, sieht so aus, daß wir uns außerhalb der Arbeit auch ab und zu treffen, und dann erzählt sie mir ihre Sorgen und ich bewundere dafür ihre Klamotten und, also, sie gibt mir dafür Freier ab und kassiert nix dafür, also, sie kassiert meistens nix dafür, manchmal auch, das ist schon was, kann man schon befreundet nennen (Giesen/Schumann 1980: 175).«

25 »Vergewaltigung, Körperverletzung, Freiheitsberaubung und Raub sind Vergehen, mit denen Frankfurts Stricherinnen permanent konfrontiert sind (HWG).«

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> written down. Various hand signals indicate which site the colleague is going to, people watch the clock, etc. […] Car numbers are written down. […] Car numbers and the names of dangerous clients and their addresses are written on billboards, trees, and walls. In some low-threshold drug facilities, there are books in which the women write messages about clients (ibid., author's translation).«[26]

I assume that not only in Frankfurt am Main, but also on Potsdamer Straße in West Berlin, sex workers were exposed to potentially violent clients and that they developed an internal security system in response. This assumption is also supported by sex workers Juno Mac and Molly Smith »All over the world, sex workers use strategies to stay safe: working […] in a small group on the street; visibly noting down a client's car number plate or asking for his ID, to show him that he is not anonymous (Mac/Smith 2020: 3).« Prostitutes thus developed (spatial) strategies and practices to resist violence. I also read these spatial productions as an everyday form of resistance that does not express itself confrontationally, but through social proximity, perseverance, and mutual concern. Due to the criminalization of the sex trade, prostitutes protected each other instead of calling the police. In addition, there were certainly also individual strategies for reacting to violent assaults. For example, one sex worker reported that she carried a knife with her: »The object that I most connect to sex work is a knife. I was attacked by a man I met on the street. It turned out that he had killed sex workers before. He tried to kill me with a knife. I fought him and escaped with my life (OoD 2019b).« This quote makes it clear that sex workers were also capable of a heroic form of resistance. While most of the examples were classified as »weak resistance,« there were also exceptions here. Taken together, the examples show that sex workers asserted themselves through various forms of resistance – mostly through collective protection systems and spatial practices of mutual care, but also through individual strategies of self-defense and acute resistance. Resistance thus manifested itself in many ways: as every day and persistent

26 »Auf dem Straßenstrich ist es Usus, daß Frau meist mit einer Kollegin zusammenarbeitet und die Frauen aufeinander aufpassen. Die Nummern der Freierfahrzeuge werden aufgeschrieben. Es gibt verschiedene Handzeichen, die erkennen lassen, auf welchen Stichplatz die Kollegin fährt, es wird auf die Uhr geachtet etc. […] Autonummern und die Namen von gefährlichen Kunden und deren Adressen werden auf Plakatwände, Bäume und Mauern geschrieben. In manchen niedrigschwelligen Drogeneinrichtungen liegen Bücher aus, in die die Frauen Nachrichten über Freier schreiben (HWG 1997).«

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resistance through solidarity and mindfulness, but occasionally also in the form of open confrontation.

Pimps also played a special role in controlling and distributing space. While the street space was initially hardly controlled by these actors, they later took on a more dominant role. Around 1980, it was possible to work without pimps – in contrast to the »tolerance zones« of other large West German cities – but this had consequences. If sex workers acted without them, they were left with far less popular locations, such as darker, more secluded, and less safe spaces (cf. Savier et al. 1987: 32–35; cf. H C 1980: 11). These contexts make it clear that sex workers did not position themselves arbitrarily on the street but were usually ordered to do so by higher-ranking actors in the sex trade. If prostitutes insisted on »placing« themselves, their striving for autonomy was punished with spatial marginalization. Thus, while sex workers organized themselves in the form of »collective care networks« against violent clients, they seemed to act more individually against pimps. In this context, sex worker H. reported:

> »[The prostitutes] unite when it comes to a client, the cohesion is incredibly strong. But when it comes to the pimps … there are a few, but they get so many barriers … All the Frankfurt pimps, they drove up here in huge buses and fought here because the Persians wanted to spread out […] [in West Berlin]. The pimps marched in from all the cities and beat them up. They had an organization […]. You can't fight them. No matter how many women join forces. […] They always have a longer arm (Giesen/Schumann 1980: 178f., author's translation).«[27]

Collective self-organization was therefore not universally possible, but depended on the other side. While sex workers organized collectively against individually acting clients, this strategy hardly worked against structures such as pimp cartels. The descriptions also show the power imbalance in

27 »[Die Prostituierten] schließen sich zusammen, wenns um nen Freier geht, da ist der Zusammenhalt unwahrscheinlich stark. Aber in [B]ezug auf die Zuhälter … da sind vereinzelte, aber die kriegen dann so viel Keile, nee. … Die ganzen Frankfurter Zuhälter, mit Riesenbussen sind die hier aufgefahren und haben hier gekämpft, weil die Perser sich […] [in West-Berlin] breitmachen wollten. Aus sämtlichen Städten sind da die Zuhälter aufmarschiert und haben die da fertiggemacht. Die haben ne Organisation […]. Da kommst du nicht gegen an. Da können sich noch so viele Frauen zusammenschließen. […] Die haben immer nen längeren Arm (Giesen/Schumann 1980: 178f.).«

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the hierarchized sex industry: While sex workers actually sold sex, third parties such as pimps, those who managed street prostitution, and allocated sections of the street profited. The historically grown criminalization and marginalization, as well as sex workers' scepticism toward the police empowered pimps to use physical and psychological violence against sex workers seemingly without consequence to enforce their claims to space and power (cf. H N 1988: 6–26). The »weak resistance« of the sex workers here was more individualized, limited, passive, and invisible: It consisted of accepting locational disadvantages, paying off debts to free themselves from dependency (cf. Härlin / Sontheimer 1983: 89f.), persevering in the face of violence, and surviving.

Spatial Productions of Sex Workers as a Collective, and Resistant Practice

The analysis of the spatial productions of sex workers on Potsdamer Straße in West Berlin in the 1980s as an example of »counter architectures of sex work« shows how urban space was formed beyond official planning through everyday, barely visible actions. The street was shaped by the actions of those who were excluded from official spatial orders and was characterized by their routines – waiting, the targeted positioning of bodies, the persistent search for places for sexual acts, and the fleeting appropriation. Potsdamer Straße thus served not only as a transit space but also as a working environment for sex workers and was reinterpreted as a zone of collective care and a place of social negotiation. As hybrid spaces between »public« and »private,« »distanced« and »intimate,« they eluded clear spatial orders. This spatial ambiguity and ambivalence harbored a potential for resistance that permeated the spatial strategies and practices of sex workers and was articulated not through open confrontation, but through everyday presence, and ephemeral, fluid, as well as informal appropriation of space. Ewa Majewska's concept of »weak resistance« (cf. ibid. 2021) – a soft, non-heroic resistance that becomes effective in the vulnerable and is characterized precisely by concern – is a solution to this form of insistence.

Sex workers acted in a state of structural vulnerability: without state protection, socially stigmatized, and exposed to patriarchal violence and exploitation. However, it was precisely this vulnerability that gave rise to solidarity practices in which care became the central element of resistance:

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In the absence of institutional securities, »collective care networks« formed – alliances based on shared experiences of exclusion, danger, and mutual dependence. Prices were agreed, territories divided up, and information about dangerous customers passed on. Colleagues stood by each other in the event of illness, emergencies, or violence. These networks of care were not merely survival strategies, but an expression of the resistant production of space by sex workers – based on trust, respect, and collective responsibility.

At the same time, they reveal the limits of collective self-organization. Within the hierarchized sex industry, marginalized sex workers – such as trans, queer, and racialized people – were once again excluded. Others deliberately refused to organize collectively, whether out of a sense of competition or a desire for independence. In addition, collective protection practices also reached their limits when it was no longer a question of organization vis-à-vis individual customers, but of organized power structures of pimps. These increasingly controlled the distribution of space on the street, allocated locations, and demanded debts if a sex worker wanted to free herself from dependency – often under the use of violence. Anyone who evaded their control was punished with spatial marginalization. Resistance to this form of structural violence often remained individualized and silent: it expressed itself in accepting inconvenient locations, in waiting, in survival.

Despite these ruptures, the spatial productions of sex workers on Potsdamer Straße in West Berlin in the 1980s reveal anti-hegemonic negotiation processes that can be read as part of a feminist building culture. This building culture undermined dominant planning and usage hierarchies, focused on marginalized perspectives on space, and made care work and collective organization visible as essential elements of spatial practice. Feminist building culture here does not mean architectural design, but rather resistant spatial production from below that challenges patriarchal orders by creating spaces beyond representation, control, and standardized publicity. These historical practices not only open up a new perspective on urban spatial production but also have relevance for current and future strategies of precariously living groups. In the presence of growing housing shortages, exclusionary migration regimes, and advancing precarization of work and state control, they show: Even under adverse conditions, collective infrastructures can be developed beyond institutional systems – through mutual care, shared knowledge, and strategic use of space. The »counter architectures of sex work« are therefore not only evidence of past self-organization, but also model forms of solidary space production for future urban struggles.

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