

# Spree Riverbanks for Everyone!

## What Remains of “Sink Mediaspree”?<sup>1</sup>

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*Jan Dohnke*

In recent years, the protests against the large-scale investment project “Mediaspree” in Kreuzberg-Friedrichshain have repoliticized the public debate on urban development more than any other event in Berlin. In the context of urban development that is increasingly dominated by neoliberal concepts in the wake of German reunification, the “Sink Mediaspree” initiative has been especially effective in putting fundamental questions about the sense and purpose of the urban development in Berlin back on the agenda. In a manner that drew the wider public’s attention, this movement also succeeded in challenging “entrepreneurial urban policy” in general. In fact, the planning decisions that have provoked citizens’ protest since 2006 contained many elements that seamlessly fit into Berlin’s neoliberal restructuring. The commitment to large-scale, investor-friendly projects at the expense of local organisational structures and needs in order to create locational advantages for the city in the international competition to attract investors; advancing privatisation and commercialisation to the disadvantage of the broader public good; and, overall, the increasingly one-dimensional orientation of planning and land utilisation toward economic targets.

In the light of the state of Berlin’s difficult financial situation, development is largely expected to come from the private sector, whose investments facilitate construction projects and, on this basis, are supposed to create new jobs. Apart from marketing strategies, Berlin (like many other cities) also draws on particular incentive strategies, e.g. the affordable provision of infrastructure, public subsidies, tax concessions, and a form of planning that privileges major investors by means of its large-scale and dense nature. At the same time, Berlin has either adopted a passive role in the development of the city’s economy by re-

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**1** | Source: Dohnke, Jan (2013) Was bleibt von Mediaspree versenken? In Holm, A. (ed.) *Reclaim Berlin. Soziale Kämpfe in der neoliberalen Stadt*. Assoziation A, Berlin/Hamburg, forthcoming.

lying exclusively on private-sector forces or has brought its remaining activities and services primarily in line with economic criteria (cf. e.g. Lebuhn 2007).

Based on the premise that urban policy challenges are constantly increasing in scope and complexity, and that collaborative efforts with relevant economic and civil society actors are needed to appropriately address these challenges, the realignment of urban policy has been accompanied by novel institutional arrangements with non-state actors. These have increasingly come to dominate both the content and targets of urban policies. Governing by way of *urban governance* does, however, raise questions as regards well-established democratic norms and the accountability of urban politics (Edwards 2002). For instance, the opportunity to participate directly in urban development processes is, by and large, a privilege of actors with economic clout (Walters 2004). As a result, urban politics and policy-making centered on social equity has increasingly retreated to the background (Häußermann et al. 2008). Moreover, many of these new forms of cooperation occur in an “institutional void” (Hajer 2003), where rules are mostly hidden from the public. While the urban population is given some opportunities to participate in urban policy making, this is usually confined to smaller details and tied to a predefined scope of action that allows discussion of the “how” but not the “if” of the issues at stake. Public participation is desirable as long as it does not call into question the rationalities and norms of the “entrepreneurial city.” However, as soon as individuals or groups dare to raise their voices in favor of a more socially balanced or alternative development path, their claims are quickly dismissed as “unrealistic” in public debates (cf. Beaumont & Nicholls 2008). In the light of the poor social and economic outcomes of neoliberal development, more and more social movements have emerged recently in Berlin to contest the dominance of neoliberal urban politics. The protests against “Mediaspree”, which were instigated and led by the “Sink Mediaspree!” initiative, were the first in a series of citywide protests. These protests illustrated the conflicts between residents’ interests and urban policy driven by the profit imperatives of the private sector. In the wake of Mediaspree protests, two key questions emerge: “What remains of the movement?” and “What can future protest movements learn from it?”

## “MEDIASPREE” – AN ANCHOR FOR THE FUTURE?<sup>2</sup>

The planned area for the “Mediaspree” project is situated only a few kilometers southeast of the center of Berlin. Stretching along both sides of the Spree river, it forms a section of several kilometers with a surface area of 180 hectares. For

**2** | Referring to the motto “Mediaspree – Ankerplatz Zukunft” (Mediaspree – An Anchor for the Future).

the most part, this area is located within the district of Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg, which was newly established in 2001. During the Cold War division of Berlin, the Spree marked the border between East Berlin (Friedrichshain) and West Berlin (Kreuzberg) in this area. The west side was characterized by industry. The east side (which is the much larger part of the area), dominated by the building of the Berlin Wall, was a former harbor area, as well as the location for large railway and industrial facilities. After reunification (the so-called *Wende*), numerous industrial facilities fell into disuse. Owing to its central location and the boom of waterfront development projects in other metropolises, the area was soon recognized as an essential development area of Berlin. Initial plans were made as early as in the mid-1990s. They envisaged an enlargement of the city center on the eastern side of the river, with a high density of buildings as well as a focus on offices and retail trade. On both sides of the river, new urban neighborhoods were supposed to develop and connect the area to the surrounding residential districts.

Ever since, the planning of this area has been regarded as an issue of city-wide relevance. It was further substantiated by the “Mission Statement Spree Area” (SenStadt 2001) and the “Mediaspree” development plan. In line with the *Zeitgeist*, the latter set out plans for a new center for Berlin’s media and creative industries, to contain some of the sector’s leading companies. The idea was that this “anchor point” would initiate and promote development in the future. Altogether, the area was earmarked for a dozen high-rise buildings, several hundred thousand square meters of offices, hotels and luxury apartments, an arena for huge events and other event locations. Altogether, this development was expected to create up to 40,000 jobs.

This vision of a glamorous world of offices and consumption stood in sharp contrast to the reality of life in adjacent neighborhoods, which were densely built, dominated by old buildings, social housing and the odd green area. These neighborhoods are inhabited by a diverse mixture of workers, students and other people on generally low incomes. On the Kreuzberg side, this mix is complemented by a high share of people with a Turkish background as well as a strong left-wing and anarchist scene. While this scene had established itself in Kreuzberg over decades in the shadow of the Berlin wall, it also came to manifest itself in Friedrichshain during the 1990s. Due to rising rents (which were often justified by landlords who cited the Mediaspree project) and ongoing gentrification processes in other parts of the inner city, there has been increasing concern that this large-scale project will have adverse effects on living conditions in the neighbouring districts.

The planning and realization of this mega-project were developed in discussions between public and private partners. In the initial planning phase, the vast majority of land belonged to the state of Berlin or public enterprises (which, in turn, were partially owned by the state of Berlin, too). The plan was

to privatize this land by means of selling it to the highest bidder, with subsequent development by private actors. So-called urban development contracts were the preferred means to this end. Bypassing building and planning laws, these contracts allowed for investor-friendly agreements without public participation. The content of these contractual agreements, including the allocation of public subsidies, has largely remained unknown to the public. A development management group founded in 2001 would later be known as “Mediaspree e.V.” This merger of property owners, investors, as well as city and district representatives managed the district’s external commercial strategy and was able to secure public funding due to its ostensible “public interest” status, even though the majority of its members were pursuing self-interested profit motives.

Previous planning measures contained some direct concessions to the public. One idea was to make the banks of the river Spree publicly accessible by building a riverside path and little parks – even if parts of these areas were to remain privately owned. Important parts of the riverbank would have been given up more or less completely to private ownership – and thus, it would have been possible to refuse entry to “undesirable” visitors and disruptive forms of use. Contrary to initial visions and despite numerous large-scale privatization measures, only a few of the planned developments made it beyond the planning stage. This was not least due to the low demand for office and retail spaces in Berlin. Only in a few isolated cases, and with the lure of massive subsidies from the Berlin state, was it possible to successfully attract large media and creative companies (e.g. MTV and Universal) as “anchors” in this area. In fact, many of the highly touted “new” jobs were not newly created: instead, they had already existed in other districts or cities, and were now shifted to this area.

At the same time, creative minds and individuals with permits to temporarily use parts of area were reinventing the industrial wasteland, building a subculture scene on the riverbanks consisting of “beach bars”, trailer parks, clubs, and socio-cultural projects. As a result, the area became more and more important and attractive to people outside the district. Due to its alternative, chaotic, and relatively “open” development, it was accessible to a broad range of users and thus stood in contrast to the official forms of planning dominated by master plans, profit orientation and formal restrictions. This was also reflected in access to the river, which was forbidden or hindered by some landlords to avoid “disturbances.” By contrast, many temporary users enabled access to the water for the first time, even if this access partly entailed (modest) entrance fees.

The Berlin Senate and some of the investors involved in Mediaspree soon became aware of the presence and relevance of these interim users. Investors began marketing the subculture scene along the Spree’s riverbanks as a positive locational factor, or made direct attempts to attract temporary users as “placeholders”. Other landlords, however, considered it more promising to market their premises without temporary users and therefore made attempts

to actively terminate or remove existing forms of use. In this manner, temporary uses were subordinated to the primacy of the economy, their right to exist being tied to their location's economic value. This treatment must be regarded as highly contradictory in nature. On the one hand, it was officially noted that many temporary users pursued the goal of wresting certain spaces from a world dominated by commercial constraints in order to create something different. On the other hand, their temporary character was emphasised, as this kind of interim use was only deemed suitable for areas that were not immediately available for "commercial exploitation" (SenStadt 2007). While self-determination and a sense of personal belonging were recognised as factors in this context, it proved difficult to fit them into economic calculations. As a consequence, this provoked increasing conflicts of use throughout the area.

## THE "SINK MEDIASPREE" CAMPAIGN

In response to the noticeable and ever increasing development pressures on the inner city, particularly those associated with the Mediaspree project, in 2006 members of the left-wing alternative scene founded the "Sink Mediaspree" initiative (Mediaspree versenken!). Their aim was to create a counterweight to urban planning that neglected social and ecological dimensions, as well as to impede rapid development along the banks of the river Spree created by and for large-scale investors, and oriented not towards the district's needs nor the local residents' and users' desires for Spree riverbanks (MSV 2010: 4f.). In the summer of 2007, "Sink Mediaspree" decided to launch a so-called *Bürgerbegehren* (citizens' initiative, see information in box) to raise public interest and legitimacy through a direct democratic vote. To these ends, three demands were made:

*No new building on a 50 meter wide strip on both sides of the Spree.* By this means, the idea was to withdraw the most "precious" areas from the economic logic of utilisation. The resulting free space would allow for a broad and diverse use of the Spree banks (including temporary forms of use), one that went beyond the opportunities offered by the planned public riverside path.

*Limiting the height of new buildings to a maximum of 22 meters.* This historical height level was meant to limit building density and, moreover, ensure that the new buildings fitted in with the older buildings in the surrounding residential areas. This measure was also geared to questioning the principle of "quantity instead of quality" (which gives highest priority to maximising floor space) and to considering alternative ways of planning.

*Rejecting the construction of another road bridge:* Instead of the proposed bridge for automobiles, a new link over the Spree would be accessible only to pedestrians and bicyclists so as to protect the surrounding residential areas from a sharp increase in traffic.

The citizens' initiative entitled "Spree banks for all!" was officially launched in October 2007. It was addressed to the local district, which was officially responsible for the planning measures within the Mediaspree area.

### Citizens' initiative and referenda

In 2006 *citizens' initiatives* were introduced in Berlin as an instrument to allow for more participation at the district level. For a citizens' initiative to be successful, the initiative needs to be approved by the district after which three per cent of all eligible voters have to support the initiative by signature within a set period of six months. If successful, the district administration is asked to discuss the implementation of the citizens' initiative. Should an agreement on this issue not be reached, a *referendum* must be held within three months: The district's inhabitants will be asked to vote on the content of the citizens' initiative. For a referendum to be successful 15 per cent of all eligible voters<sup>3</sup> must participate in the vote – and the absolute majority has to vote in favour of the citizens' initiative (BezVG 2006).

The campaign was a resounding success. The collection of signatures helped to raise awareness of the initiative and bring the issue to public attention. In the end, 15,000 signatures were submitted – significantly more than the minimum required. Given that no agreement was reached in the subsequent negotiations, a referendum was scheduled for July 13, 2008. At the same time, intensive networking, public relations, as well as diverse forms of imaginative and non-violent protest helped to move the campaign beyond the confines of traditional left-wing resistance in the district and gain a large number of new supporters. This applied in particular to the interim users, who were not ready to abandon what they had achieved. While at first the opponents of the citizens' initiative were quick to mention the initiative and its supporters in connection with burning cars and other forms of violent protest, these claims ultimately did not hold water.

Based on the widespread rejection of the undemocratic development plans for the Mediaspree area and the shared goal of defending the value of intermediate uses, socio-cultural free spaces and quality of life beyond economic criteria, a district-wide alliance between the creative and left wing milieu was created, which became manifest as a new kind of protest movement in terms of both its form and activism (cf. Colomb and Novy 2011; Scharenberg and Bader 2009). In addition to a visible presence in the district, this alliance also resulted in a variety of creative forms of protest in the run up to the referendum. For instance, there were actions such as "cheering for investors," blocking a

**3** | In Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg, 3 percent of all eligible voters correspond to about 5,600 people, while 15 percent correspond to about 28,000 people.

steam boat with representatives from the worlds of real estate and business with inflatable dinghies, and the “Spree Parade,” a demonstration held one day prior to the referendum that mobilized more than 3,000 participants and was supported by local clubs. Local cinemas ran advertisements for the initiative, while posters and banners with the slogan “Spree banks for all!” appeared everywhere in the surrounding residential areas. Thanks to the clearly defined content and deadlines of the citizens’ initiative, there were also milestones and targets which helped to focus and “frame” the campaign. For many residents and supporters, the campaign actually served as a more general outlet for their opposition to current urban development processes and policies.

The referendum on July 13, 2008 was an overwhelming success for “Sink Mediaspree” and its supporters. With a turnout of almost 20 percent, 87 percent of the voters (i.e. about 300,000 people) approved the initiative – and thereby rendered the referendum “Spree banks for all!” the most successful in Berlin to date. Political decision makers were almost overwhelmed by the popular groundswell triggered by the initiative. In order to avoid the need to completely revise their plans for Mediaspree, the largest political parties in the district, the Greens and the Left Party, found themselves forced to defend an investment project against their own electorates. Once it became apparent that the referendum would yield a result in favor of the initiative, a debate was launched on how to deal with it. On the one hand, it was impossible to ignore a successful plebiscite. On the other hand, officially the referendum was a mere recommendation to politicians, and not legally binding. Out of this confusing situation, a decision was made to establish the special committee “Spree Area,” which was composed of nine representatives from the district parliament (BVV) and four members of the initiative. The task of this committee was to jointly find solutions to the issues raised by the referendum.

## **THE OBSTACLES TO PARTICIPATION IN TIMES OF INVESTOR-FRIENDLY URBAN DEVELOPMENT**

September 2008 marked the beginning of more than 15 months of marathon negotiations in which options for planning changes were debated with the users and owners of all premises affected by the referendum. The members of the “Sink Mediaspree” initiative re-focused their work and energy from the street towards the committee. Here, the obstacles to genuine citizen participation in a business-oriented urban policy context became clearly evident. The major arguments used to legitimize Mediaspree can be summed up by the formula “jobs, investment, and global competition.” The figure of 40,000 new jobs envisaged for the Mediaspree area was constantly presented as an argument in favor of the development, even though its accuracy was never substantiated. In the context

of international urban competition, Mediaspree was presented as a development that would allow Berlin to compete with other European metropolises (Der Tagesspiegel, July 14, 2008); it was dubbed a responsible, sustainable form of urban project planning that would open up new prospects for the future (Der Tagesspiegel, August 4, 2008). As a result, Berliners would profit from both access to the Spree as well as the investment and new jobs created throughout the entire city (Der Tagesspiegel, July 15, 2008). In this way, citywide relevance was ascribed to the plans for Mediaspree, while the campaign against it was depicted as a local protest by a small minority that stood in opposition to the overall general interests of the city. In line with this interpretation, investors argued that a few thousand people were sabotaging investments running into billions as well as the creation of 40,000 new jobs. Indeed, the referendum revealed a strange understanding of democracy on the part of some of the proponents of Mediaspree. According to some voices, in the Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg district, “17 percent of all eligible voters [...] sank Mediaspree. In fact, this alleged majority only represents a minority – namely 17 percent” (Der Tagesspiegel, July 20, 2008).<sup>4</sup>

The expected compensation payments that would have to be made to investors for modification of the development plan proved to be the most important driver of the debate. Although the affected land was mainly to be used for speculative development (there was no actual demand for new offices or hotels), the private owners could refer to their planning documents when discussing the economic value of the project. It was said that if the demand to ban new buildings within 50 meters of the riverside and restrict building height to 22 meters was implemented, the buildings directly affected by this decision would experience a massive loss in value. The district claimed that compensation amounting to 165 million Euros would be required. As this calculation already included publicly owned premises as well as properties with buildings already constructed on them, the “Sink Mediaspree” initiative estimated compensation of around 40 million Euros would be appropriate. In the light of Berlin’s (and its districts’) chronically strained finances, the compensation payments became the major argument for not changing the plans with regards to the already privatized properties. In the absence of the political will to repurchase properties in order to realize the aims of the referendum, the private sector had complete control over these areas.

At the same time, the Berlin executive had repeatedly stressed prior to the referendum that in order to safeguard its attractiveness as an investment loca-

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**4** | This kind of assertion ignores the fact that almost every democratically elected majority would be confronted with severe legitimization problems. For example, the then governing Berlin coalition had “only” been elected by 25.6 percent of all eligible voters (Statistisches Landesamt 2006).

tion, Berlin has to act as a “reliable partner” (Der Tagesspiegel, July 11, 2008) in its relations with investors. It was also argued that risk of breaching or jeopardizing contracts with private investors through implementing changes in planning was also grounds for overruling the district on the issue. Even though the districts of Berlin are in charge of urban planning (i.e. developing and modifying land-use plans, assigning building rights), the Berlin Senate is entitled to remove their planning responsibility when something of “urgent citywide interest” (§7 AB BauGB) is threatened by the respective district’s planning activities. This obviously appeared to be the case in the Mediaspree area. As a result, a range of reforms impairing private sector interests were thus rendered impossible.

This line of argument was strongly supported by the investors represented in the Mediaspree area, who repeatedly declared that Berlin’s international reputation as an investment location was at stake. According to the investors’ spokesman, “foreign associates of some investors [...] were terrified to see that it is possible to nullify legally valid contracts following a referendum” (Der Tagesspiegel, July 22, 2008). The existing forms of planning were not identified as the chief motive for rejecting Mediaspree. Arguments that had played a major role in protests, such as concerns about gentrification, the criticism towards the existing ways of handling public property, or the connection between privatisation and property speculation, were denied or negated in a selective manner. Instead, the success of the referendum was put down to an allegedly selfish minority, which had made itself comfortable within its precarious living conditions or, as the mayor put it, people “who do not like to be confronted with the demand to give something back to society” and whose criticism must “seem like pure mockery to those people in search of a job in Berlin” (Der Tagesspiegel, September 11, 2008). To the Berlin Senate, the successful referendum was explained by reference to a local protest culture that was even willing to deliberately abuse the participatory instrument of referenda. According to this argument, the criticism raised against Mediaspree in Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg was to be regarded as a quasi-natural process that should not be taken too seriously. Taken together, these assumptions denied the legitimacy of the district’s citizens’ protests.

These developments were also accompanied by a thorough reassessment of temporary uses, which had made the Mediaspree area a well-known location even beyond the confines of Berlin. While initially the emphasis was put on the positive role of intermediate users of space as catalysts of desired developments (see above), they now found themselves accused of egotism and a form of profit-orientation that allegedly stood in the way of public interests and was thus “not acceptable” (Der Tagesspiegel, July 11, 2008). At the same time, the previous (unplanned) development, which had provided jobs as well as access to the river, was concealed – and the banks were reinterpreted as a “piece of

wasteland that virtually cries out for development” (Der Tagesspiegel, July 14, 2008). By this means, a successful referendum turned into an abuse of instruments of direct democracy, the claim for more public space and a mostly non-commercial development were reinterpreted as selfish, and profit-seeking interests and local residents were now regarded as an antisocial minority.

In line with this, it was stressed that the responsibility to implement the referendum rested with the district and that the executive would not do it the favor of releasing it from its obligations (Berliner Zeitung, July 16, 2008). Regardless of the fact that citywide interests appeared to be threatened in the area, it was the district that was declared responsible for safeguarding exactly those citywide interests. However, at the same time, a citywide reason was still deemed necessary to supervise the implementation of these processes:

“In the coming months, the Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg district will therefore [...] be closely monitored as to how it deals with the existing development plans and legally valid urban development contracts. As a matter of course, legal and planning certainty must be given to implement investments of such a magnitude. We shall be taking care of this matter, which we regard as essential to Berlin’s international standing” (Senator for Urban Development, Junge-Reyer, Der Tagesspiegel, August 4, 2008).

Against this background, the discussion was primarily focused on the properties still in public ownership, i.e. those belonging to the real estate fund (*Liegenschaftsfonds*) of the state of Berlin; the Berlin Port and Warehouse Company, BEHALA; and the Berlin Refuse and Cleaning Services (BSR). The debate centered on the idea that any planning changes to publicly owned properties should be possible without entailing further compensation payments. The rationale of action pursued by private investors was, however, also adopted by the state-owned companies and the *Liegenschaftsfonds*. They regarded any drop in revenues caused by a discontinuation of sale or changes in planning as a loss and thus saw no reason to relinquish the potential revenues. As the public would face losses if it was not possible to sell public property at the maximum value, selling was regarded as the only sensible decision for the public enterprises present on the banks of the Spree. That public access to these areas might be irrecoverably lost seemed of little importance. During the discussion, responsibility was assigned to the Berlin Senate, which, as an owner, had issued the directive to sell state-owned premises to the highest bidder. For this reason, the state-owned companies and the real estate fund claimed that it fell outside their powers to modify their line of action.

“I have the mandate to sell properties for the maximum gain. Should the state of Berlin as a shareholder want something else now, it should say so clearly” (BEHALA director Peter Stäblein, Berliner Zeitung, July 16, 2008).

Despite being the owner, the Berlin Senate nonetheless emphasized that the state-owned companies had economic independence. This gave the paradoxical impression that there was no responsible partner within this state-owned property management coalition that would have been able to change the adopted course of action, i.e. marketing and selling public property to the highest bidder. The key role of the Senate became even more apparent when the district tried to change planning decisions within its area by means of applying its own planning law. Throughout the negotiations, the Department for Urban Development adopted such a threatening posture that the district hardly dared to modify existing plans. Nonetheless, the situation escalated in February 2009. The riverside area of a property belonging to the state-owned real estate fund was converted into a green area. As an ultimatum, the executive threatened to remove the district's responsibility for the issue unless it reversed this decision, which it promptly did. On the whole, the work in the special committee had little in common with the focused and creative protest that had contributed significantly to the success of the referendum. As almost all activities were transferred to the special committee and given the appearance of an open, property-related discussion instead of an overriding debate on the guiding principles of urban development in Berlin, the campaign "lost much of its dynamism. In this way, the underlying conditions that severely hampered the likelihood of implementing the aims of the referendum were never sufficiently debated.

The Berlin Senate managed to indirectly guarantee the guiding principles of the Mediaspree project and advance the planned development via the state-owned companies without having to take an active role itself. Investment security was used as an argument to guarantee the inviolability of private sector interests. Planning changes on private premises within the area were refused in a dogmatic manner. At the same time, the privatization of public property was promoted by the state-owned companies, which – although formally independent – had adopted a one-dimensional economic logic of action at the command of the Berlin Senate. With the threat of withdrawing planning competencies from the district authorities, the Senate pressured the districts' leaders not to call into question this kind of urban development. This led to a series of actions in which it became hard to distinguish the actions and motivations of public stakeholders from those of private investors, and one which could not be broken at a district level.

Given the limited scope of action, it was thus only possible to find solutions and compromises that did not touch on the Mediaspree project's guiding principles and which were remote from the actual demands issued by the referendum. As a result, the "Sink Mediaspree!" participation in the special committee served to legitimize urban policy that it was barely able to influence. When more and more members and supporters of the initiative became aware

of this, its representatives left the committee in late 2009 in order to prevent the further endorsement of its decisions by their presence.

## **SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK — WHAT REMAINS OF “SINK MEDIASPREE”?**

There were widely diverging views on whether the results obtained represented a successful outcome of the referendum. The district celebrated “more Spree banks for everyone” (*Berliner Zeitung*, November 18, 2009), whereas the “Sink Mediaspree!” initiative pointed to the “pitiful results” of the negotiations (*die tageszeitung*, December 3, 2009). For some areas, a broadening of public space along the riverside was achieved, and one high-rise building was removed from the plans. It is indicative that these modifications were only made possible on state-owned properties. Notably, they mostly occurred through internal agreements between representatives of the district, the Berlin executive and the state-owned companies rather than by way of public debate within the special committee. For this reason, they must be understood as a result of general public pressure and the district’s negotiating skills rather than as an expression of the opportunities to bring about changes in planning by way of participating in special committees established by local government.

As the campaign against the project Mediaspree has shown, it is possible to turn local large-scale projects and undemocratic forms of planning into an issue of citywide relevance and, moreover, to successfully formulate fundamental criticism to neoliberal urban policy. This was only possible on the basis of a common objective as well as persistent, creative and peaceful protest by a broad alliance that existed and acted off the beaten path. In fact, the citizens’ initiative provided to be a democratically legitimate vehicle for framing the debate from which political decision makers could not hide. A different strategy would, however, have been necessary to achieve better results. When the protests had reached their peak, it was still possible to put the background issues in the protest against Mediaspree onto the city’s agenda. By this means, critical voices fundamentally questioning the logic of Mediaspree’s proponents had also found a city-wide audience. But instead of maintaining pressure and instead of publicly addressing the key role played by the Berlin executive, the one-sided emphasis of the special committee weakened the pressure on political decision makers. In the end, the voices in favor of Mediaspree were the only ones heard in the public debate. Moreover, active support for the initiative declined because the referendum had suggested a successful end to the campaign, while in reality it marked only the beginning of protracted and time-consuming negotiations. As a result, there was a lack of resources right at the point in time when they were most needed in the “political game” against the public admin-

istration and politicians. Finally, neither the political instrument chosen at the district level (the referendum) nor participation in the special committee were sufficient to influence the decisive actor, the Berlin Senate. While it is difficult to identify responsible policy-makers in a situation of increasingly interconnected public and private interests, it nonetheless remains essential to do so in order to enable a genuine form of participation. More recent urban political alliances are well aware of this and have thus made an effort to come directly into contact with the Berlin executive.

Despite the comparatively meager results, it would not be fair to regard the protests against Mediaspree as a failure. Instead, they can be seen as a prelude to a growing awareness for fundamental issues of urban development in Berlin. This has become obvious on the banks of the Spree, but also in other parts of the city, especially as regards the handling of public real estate. While a neoliberal and “entrepreneurial” form of urban policy may continue to prevail in Berlin, the emphatic vote for an alternative form of development along the Spree will be certain to shape political debates in the city in the years to come.

*Translated by “Truly Translated,” together with Ben Restle*

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