

Subcultural space through the adaptive cycle – Resistance and commodification in Berlin Kreuzberg SO36

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Abstract

Urban transformation is commonly interpreted through processes of capital accumulation, gentrification, and displacement, while less attention has been paid to the temporal trajectories of subcultural spaces and their changing relationship with commodification. This study examines whether Holling's adaptive cycle provides a useful analytical framework for interpreting these transformations in Berlin's Kreuzberg SO36. The research combines literature and document analysis with fieldwork conducted during four visits between 2023 and 2025, including systematic site observation and photographic documentation, supplemented by focused micro-interviews. Three symbolically significant sites – the Georg von Rauch Haus, M99, and Cuvrybrache – are examined as contrasting trajectories of subcultural spatial production. The findings show that these spaces can be interpreted through different phases of the adaptive cycle, characterized by changing configurations of potential, connectedness, and resilience. The cases further demonstrate that the accumulation of cultural and symbolic value can simultaneously strengthen subcultural spaces and increase their susceptibility to institutionalization and economic appropriation. However, these trajectories are not deterministic: legalization may constrain autonomy while supporting persistence, whereas displacement and redevelopment produce different outcomes. The study demonstrates the value of the adaptive cycle as a qualitative heuristic for interpreting the non-linear transformation of contested urban spaces.

Keywords: subculture, gentrification, production of space, adaptive cycle, Berlin

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Introduction

Berlin has undergone extensive socio-spatial transformation since German reunification, with gentrification particularly affecting its inner-city districts. Kreuzberg occupies a distinctive position within this process because its present transformation builds upon a history of political marginality, low-cost housing, migration, and alternative forms of urban space production.

During the division of Berlin, the eastern part of Kreuzberg occupied a peripheral po-

sition within West Berlin. The Berlin Wall enclosed the district on three sides, creating structural isolation that provided fertile ground for subcultural occupation during the 1970s and 1980s (LENNERT, L. 2014).

As HOCHMUTH shows, the wall generated lasting socio-spatial fragmentation (HOCHMUTH, H. 2017). Historically, Kreuzberg was commonly divided into the former postal districts SO36 and SW61. The abbreviations refer to *Südost* (southeast) and *Südwest* (southwest), while the numbers derive from Berlin's former postal districts. Although these des-

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ignations no longer have an administrative function, SO36 remains widely used to refer to the eastern part of Kreuzberg and its distinctive socio-cultural identity. The loss of green spaces, economic decline, industrial outmigration, and demographic restructuring reshaped the district. Guest workers – primarily Turkish and Southern European – settled due to low rents (HOCHMUTH, H. 2017), producing a culturally heterogeneous yet low-prestige social composition (BERNT, M. and HOLM, A. 2013). This configuration persisted after reunification.

Although gentrification in Berlin and Kreuzberg has been extensively studied, existing research has primarily examined processes such as displacement, housing-market restructuring, urban policy, and resistance. Less attention has been paid to whether the transformation of subculturally produced urban spaces can be understood as a cyclical process in which their emergence, consolidation, institutionalization, and commodification represent interconnected stages of transformation. This constitutes the central problem addressed by the present study.

Rather than reconstructing a linear trajectory of change, this article interprets SO36 as a site of cyclical socio-spatial transformation through HOLLING's adaptive cycle model (HOLLING, C.S. 2001). The study examines whether this model can provide an additional analytical framework for understanding the changing relationship between subcultural spatial production, intangible capital, institutionalization, and commodification. On this basis, the analysis proceeds from four interrelated hypotheses. Subcultural spaces in Kreuzberg SO36 are expected to correspond to distinct phases of the adaptive cycle, reflected in changing levels of capital, connectedness, and resilience. Their emergence and consolidation are hypothesized to coincide with the accumulation of intangible forms of capital, whereas increasing institutionalization and commodification are expected to strengthen connectedness and the realization of material capital while re-

ducing their transformative capacity. Finally, the analysis assumes that gentrification facilitates the incorporation of symbolic and cultural values produced within subcultural spaces into market-oriented urban development.

Space and its cyclical transformation

Building on LEFEBVRE and SOJA, urban space is approached as socially produced and inherently dynamic (LEFEBVRE, H. 1991; SOJA, E.W. 1996). LEFEBVRE's distinction between perceived, conceived, and lived space provides the basis for interpreting the built environment not merely as the physical setting of social conflict but as something continuously produced through social practices and representations. SOJA's spatial perspective extends this approach by emphasizing the simultaneous interaction of material, represented, and lived dimensions of space. In the Kreuzberg case, these concepts allow subcultural practices such as occupation, collective use, and symbolic appropriation to be interpreted as forms of spatial production rather than simply as reactions to urban change.

While LEFEBVRE and SOJA provide the framework for interpreting how urban space is socially produced and contested (SOJA, E. 1980; LEFEBVRE, H. 1991), NEIL SMITH and DAVID HARVEY locate these transformations within the political economy of capitalist urbanization (SMITH, N. 2002; HARVEY, D. 2006). Their approaches draw attention to the tension between use value and exchange value and to the role of capital reinvestment in restructuring urban space. This distinction is particularly relevant to Kreuzberg, where spaces appropriated for residential, cultural, or collective use increasingly acquired exchange value through their incorporation into the city's property and tourism markets.

Gentrification is therefore treated here not simply as demographic change but as a process through which locally produced spatial values become subject to economic

valorization. In Berlin, this process has been mediated by both market mechanisms and state policies, contributing to displacement and increasing pressure on lower-income residents and alternative spaces (BERNT, M. and HOLM, A. 2013; HELBRECHT, I. 2018). At the same time, these pressures have generated organized forms of resistance, particularly around housing and squatter-related spaces (DRISSEL, D. 2011).

The structure of Berlin's rental market is crucial for understanding how these broader processes materialize in Kreuzberg. Since reunification, restitution, modernization, tenant turnover and the expiration of housing subsidies have increasingly exposed previously inexpensive rental housing to market pressures (BERNT, M. 2022). These processes have been particularly consequential in inner-city neighbourhoods dominated by 19th-century tenement housing, where rents have risen substantially since the late 2000s (HÜBSCHER, M. and KALLERT, T. 2023; PETTAS, D. and SUWALA, L. 2023). In SO36, housing-market pressure is partly mediated through preservation regulations. Much of the study area is designated as a social preservation area (*Milieuschutzgebiet*), intended to protect the composition of the resident population from displacement, while parts are additionally subject to urban conservation regulations. Such institutional protections constrain particular forms of property transformation but do not remove the broader tension between the established use value of housing and its potential exchange value. This tension provides an important institutional context for the commodification processes examined in the three case studies.

Subculture and symbolic resistance

The concept of subculture has shifted from criminological to cultural and postmodern interpretations. Early Chicago School approaches framed subculture through territorialized deviance (BLACKMAN, S. 2005).

Later approaches increasingly shifted attention from deviance towards cultural practices and symbolic forms of resistance, most notably within the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) (CONNELL, K. and HILTON, M. 2015).

At the CCCS, Phil COHEN reframed subculture as symbolic resistance (COHEN, P. 1972). Resistance Through Rituals conceptualized style and ritual as class-based semiotic practice (HALL, S. and JEFFERSON, T. 1976; JEFFERSON, T. 2002). This understanding is particularly relevant to the present study because it allows visible practices and symbols to be interpreted as expressions of collective opposition to dominant social and spatial arrangements. THORNTON's concept of subcultural capital provides a further analytical link between cultural distinction and the production of symbolic value (THORNTON, S. 1995). In the context of gentrification, this is important because values initially produced within subcultural communities may subsequently become recognizable, appropriable, and economically exploitable beyond those communities.

In this study, *subculture* is used as the broader analytical category, while *counterculture* refers more specifically to subcultural formations whose practices and values explicitly challenge dominant social, political, or economic norms. The term *subculture* therefore refers to socially and spatially embedded communities whose collective practices, symbolic expressions, and value systems distinguish them from dominant cultural and market-oriented forms of urban space production. It is used not primarily to describe a particular youth style or fixed social identity, but as an analytical category for communities that produce and maintain alternative meanings, practices, and forms of collective use within urban space. In SO36, squatting, anarcho-punk communities, and other autonomous cultural practices constitute the principal manifestations of this form of subcultural spatial production and, where explicitly oppositional, of counterculture.

Subcultural production of space

Building on the understanding of space as socially produced, subcultural spatial production is approached here as the appropriation and reinterpretation of urban space through collective practices, alternative forms of use, and symbolic meanings. In Kreuzberg SO36, these processes developed under the specific historical conditions created by Berlin's division and continued to shape urban space after reunification. Although the Berlin Wall disappeared as a physical boundary, its socio-spatial effects did not disappear simultaneously. Decades of peripheralization had altered the demographic composition, housing stock, and symbolic geography of Kreuzberg, and traces of this division remained after reunification (DRISSEL, D. 2011; HOCHMUTH, H. 2017). In LEFEBVRE's terms, the transformation of material space therefore did not immediately erase meanings accumulated within lived space. From this perspective, the alternative uses and meanings attached to buildings and neighbourhood spaces in SO36 can be understood as part of a historically embedded process of spatial production rather than merely as temporary reactions to gentrification.

The vacant and functionally uncertain spaces produced by this historical transformation can also be interpreted as liminal spaces: spaces characterized by transition and unsettled meanings (CZARNIAWSKA, B. and MAZZA, C. 2003). In SO36, some of these spaces became available for appropriation by autonomous groups, most visibly through the squatting movement. Their occupation involved not only physical control of buildings but also their symbolic reinterpretation through collective use, political practices, and movement-related representations. This process is referred to here as *subcultural spatial appropriation*. Symbolic appropriation has also been examined in Central and Eastern European urban contexts, where spatial markers can express collective identities and

claims to urban space (ERŐSS, Á. and TÁTRAI, P. 2010). Although examined primarily in the context of ethnic relations, this mechanism is also relevant to SO36, where graffiti, flags, banners, and other movement-related symbols contribute to the symbolic appropriation and differentiation of urban space.

Once appropriated, such sites may develop into what KOHN conceptualizes as *radical spaces*: places in which collective practices challenge dominant political and economic arrangements (KOHN, M. 2003). This concept is particularly relevant to squatter projects because their significance derives not only from occupying property but from establishing alternative forms of collective use and organization within it.

Squatter projects differ from commercial space through their emphasis on collective use, self-organization, and alternative value systems (LENNERT, L. 2014). Their significance therefore lies in producing forms of urban space in which use value and collective meaning may temporarily take precedence over exchange value. However, meanings attached to these places through subcultural spatial production may not be shared by wider society and can therefore become sources of social conflict.

The meanings produced within such spaces may conflict with market-oriented transformations of the surrounding neighbourhood. In SO36, opposition to gentrification is expressed not only through organized political action but also through the built environment, including graffiti, banners, flags, and other movement-related symbols. These visible markers contribute to the continued symbolic differentiation of subcultural spaces even where the surrounding neighbourhood has undergone substantial commercialization.

Subcultural spatial production can therefore be understood as an ongoing interaction between material appropriation, collective meaning, and resistance to the incorporation of urban space into dominant market logics.

The adaptive cycle and the fluidity of space

The adaptive cycle provides the principal analytical model used in this study to interpret the transformation of subcultural urban spaces. Originally developed by HOLLING from resilience research in ecological systems, the model conceptualizes change not as a linear progression towards equilibrium but as a recurring movement through four phases: exploitation (r), conservation (K), release (Ω), and reorganization (α) (HOLLING, C.S. 1973, 2001). These phases describe changing relationships between accumulated potential, connectedness, and resilience within a system. The adaptive cycle (Figure 1) should be distinguished from the broader concept of panarchy. While the adaptive cycle describes the dynamics of a system at a particular scale, panarchy conceptualizes how multiple adaptive cycles operating at different spatial and temporal scales interact with one another (GUNDERSON, L.H. and HOLLING, C.S. 2002). Panarchy therefore adds a cross-scale dimension to the adaptive cycle: processes occurring within one cycle may influence the persistence or transformation of systems operating at other scales. The empirical analysis in this study is primarily

based on the adaptive cycle model, while the broader implications of cross-scale interactions are considered in the Discussion.

This distinction builds on Holling's earlier separation of resilience from stability. Stability refers to a system's capacity to return towards an equilibrium following disturbance, whereas resilience concerns its capacity to absorb change while maintaining its fundamental relationships and functions (HOLLING, C.S. 1973). Later developments of resilience theory additionally emphasized *transformability*: the capacity to create a fundamentally new system when existing ecological, social, or economic conditions become untenable (WALKER, B. *et al.* 2004). These distinctions are particularly relevant to urban transformation, where persistence, adaptation, and transformation may represent different responses to external pressures rather than different degrees of the same process.

Although developed in ecology, the adaptive cycle has subsequently been applied to social and socio-ecological systems, including community resilience (BERKES, F. and ROSS, H. 2016), and complex patterns of social change (ROGERS, J.D. 2017). Its application to urban processes has included shrinking-city trajectories (HERMANN, D. *et al.* 2016),

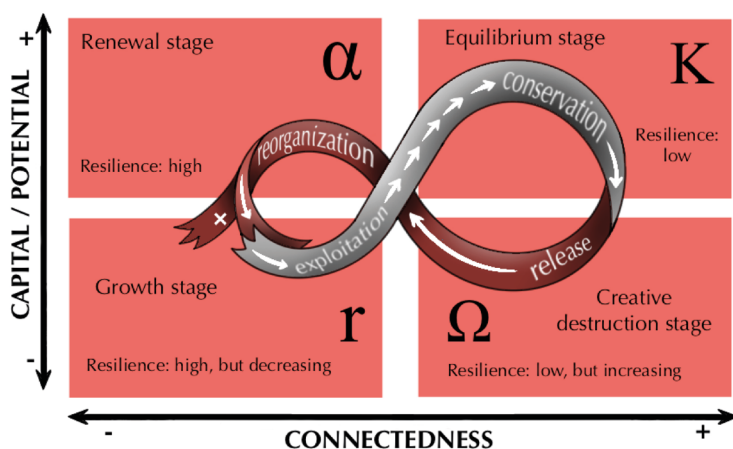


Fig. 1. The adaptive cycle model. Source: Authors' adaptation of TILL, D. (in press) based on HOLLING, C.S. (2001), and GUNDERSON, L.H. and HOLLING, C.S. (2002).

multilevel urban resilience (ROGOV, M. and ROZENBLAT, C. 2018), and community-based urban renewal (SAEZ UJAQUE, D. *et al.* 2021), and the transformation and institutionalization of countercultural spaces in Berlin SO36 (TILL, D., in press). These studies demonstrate the model's potential beyond ecological systems, while also highlighting the need to adapt its analytical dimensions carefully to the social and institutional characteristics of urban change. In this study, the adaptive cycle is applied to three subcultural sites in SO36, interpreting their transformation through changing configurations of potential, connectedness, and resilience.

The adaptive cycle distinguishes four phases – r , K , Ω , and α – through changing configurations of three central properties: potential, connectedness, and resilience (see *Figure 1*). Potential refers to the resources accumulated within the system, connectedness to the degree of internal control and interdependence among its components, and resilience to its capacity to absorb disturbance without shifting into a fundamentally different configuration (HOLLING, C.S. 2001). During the exploitation phase (r), resources are rapidly mobilized, connectedness remains relatively low, and the system retains considerable flexibility. In applying the model to subcultural urban space, this study interprets potential not only as material resources but also as accumulated intangible resources, including cultural, symbolic, and relational forms of capital. These forms of capital may subsequently acquire material or economic value as the system becomes increasingly consolidated.

The slow transition towards the conservation phase (K) marks a period of increasingly consolidated social structures. During this phase (K), accumulated potential and connectedness increase while flexibility and resilience tend to decline. Resources become increasingly bound within established structures, making the system more efficient but also potentially more vulnerable to disturbance. A sufficiently strong disturbance may trigger the release phase (Ω), during which

accumulated structures and resources are rapidly disrupted or released.

The subsequent reorganization phase (α) is characterized by low connectedness and increased opportunities for novelty and recombination. Resources released during Ω may be reorganized into new configurations, allowing either the renewal of the existing system or its transformation into a different one. The transition from α towards a new r phase therefore does not imply a return to an identical previous state but the emergence of a reorganized configuration shaped by the legacies and resources of the preceding cycle (HOLLING, C.S. 2001).

Study area and methods

The study focuses on SO36, the eastern part of Kreuzberg in the Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg borough of Berlin. The study area broadly corresponds to the historical Luisenstadt neighbourhood and adjacent Spree river-side areas, including Oranienplatz, Lausitzer Platz, Wrangelkiez, and the Reichenberger Straße area. During the division of Berlin, its peripheral location adjacent to the Berlin Wall, relatively low rents, deteriorating housing stock, and demographic transformation contributed to the concentration of migrant communities, alternative lifestyles, and autonomous movements (HOCHMUTH, H. 2017). Squatting became particularly significant from the 1970s onwards and developed into an enduring element of the area's political and cultural identity. Following reunification, SO36 shifted from a peripheral location to a more central position within Berlin, while rising property values and development pressure exposed these established communities and spaces to gentrification (BERNT, M. and HOLM, A. 2013).

The research combines a review of academic and historical literature with documentary sources and qualitative fieldwork. A database of occupied buildings was compiled primarily from the Berlin Besetzt archive

(Berlin Besetzt, 2025), and supplemented with information provided by Luisenstadt eG (Luisenstadt eG, 2026). This database provided the sampling framework for the field surveys: all identified formerly or currently occupied buildings within the study area were visited and documented.

Fieldwork was conducted during four approximately one-week research visits between 2023 and 2025: three in October and one in June 2025. It combined systematic site observation and photographic documentation with participant observation at selected local events.

The surveys documented the present condition and use of the identified buildings and systematically recorded predefined spatial markers of collective and political identity, including graffiti, posters, flags, and other movement-related symbols. Rather than being treated as independent evidence of resistance, these markers were interpreted in relation to the documented history, present use, and collective identity of each site.

Fieldwork was conducted as an external researcher rather than as a member of the autonomous communities examined. Participation in local events provided contextual familiarity, while this external position required reflexive interpretation of political and symbolic markers.

The field material was not subjected to a formal coding procedure. Instead, a predefined observational framework was used to identify movement-related visual markers, while their meanings were interpreted contextually and triangulated with documentary and historical sources. No separate intertextual analysis was conducted, as the study focused on the spatial manifestation and persistence of these markers rather than on textual relationships between individual messages. Three sites were selected purposively for detailed case analysis because of their symbolic significance within Berlin's countercultural history and their contrasting trajectories of transformation. The Georg von Rauch Haus represents the persistence of

squatting and autonomous spatial practices within SO36; the M99 functions as a long-standing symbolic node of Berlin's countercultural and anti-capitalist milieu; while the Cuvrybrache represents the opposite trajectory, in which an informally appropriated and contested space was ultimately cleared and incorporated into market-oriented redevelopment. The cases were therefore not selected as statistically representative examples, but as contrasting manifestations of subcultural spatial production that allow different configurations of the adaptive cycle to be examined.

The three cases were interpreted through the principal dimensions of the adaptive cycle: potential (capital), connectedness, and resilience, and their changing configurations across the r , K , Ω , and α phases. Material and intangible forms of capital, the degree of institutional and social connectedness, and the capacity of the respective spaces and communities to persist or reorganize under external pressure served as the main analytical dimensions. Assignment to particular phases was based on the combined interpretation of documented historical trajectories, observed material conditions, forms of social and institutional organization, and the transformation of the sites over time.

Findings: adaptive cycles and the transformation of space

For analytical purposes, the trajectories of the three case studies are traced from the release phase (Ω), characterized by the destabilization of established spatial arrangements and declining connectedness (HOLLING, C.S. 2001).

Contextualizing this phenomenon, based on the Berlin Besetzt map, such periods likely occurred between 1979–1982 and, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, in East Berlin between 1989–1990, when the number of squats surged dramatically (Berlin Besetzt, 2025). The latter can be clearly correlated with the collapse of the GDR. Additionally, the early

1980s in West Berlin as a whole – especially in Kreuzberg – were crisis years, exerting a significant impact on the real estate market conditions (HOCHMUTH, H. 2017). In the reorganization and renewal phase, due to low connectedness, new and innovative spatial combinations emerge that previously existed in isolation or in fixed forms (HOLLING, C.S. 2001). In our case, this is the period when the newly formed spatial pattern – the communities within occupied buildings – becomes self-aware and subsequently leverages the intangible capital concentrated within their possession through socially-oriented actions. In our view, the second avant-garde breaks into West Berlin at this time, concurrently with a new revolutionary class organizing itself. The bohemian anti-authoritarian communities demonstrate their high cultural capital through their events and communal life (DRISSEL, D. 2011). In the conventional representation of the adaptive cycle, the Ω - α backloop is characterized as comparatively rapid, whereas the r-K foreloop generally involves slower processes of accumulation and consolidation (HOLLING, C.S. 2001). The dismantling of obsolete, alienated struc-

tures and the process of renewal occur much more rapidly compared to the consolidation of a new hegemony (HOLLING, C.S. 2001). Autonomous small communities play a significant role in the transition between the Ω and α phases. Based on the central questions of the study, these groups, in this case, have subcultural backgrounds. However, unlike the r and K transition (which in this term represents institutionalization), the transition here is characterized by decentralization, weakening connections, and free flow. In this phase of the cycle, the transformation appears to gain new momentum.

Using the Georg von Rauch Haus as an example, the relationship between power and subculture in Kreuzberg during the 1970s, a period marked by housing shortages, can be clearly observed (VOLLMER, L. 2018). Housing issues began to emerge in the 1960s, a period during which previously established spatial and institutional arrangements became increasingly unstable, generating growing social tensions.

The placement shown in *Figure 2* reflects the current state of the site. The Rauch Haus is interpreted as remaining within the reor-

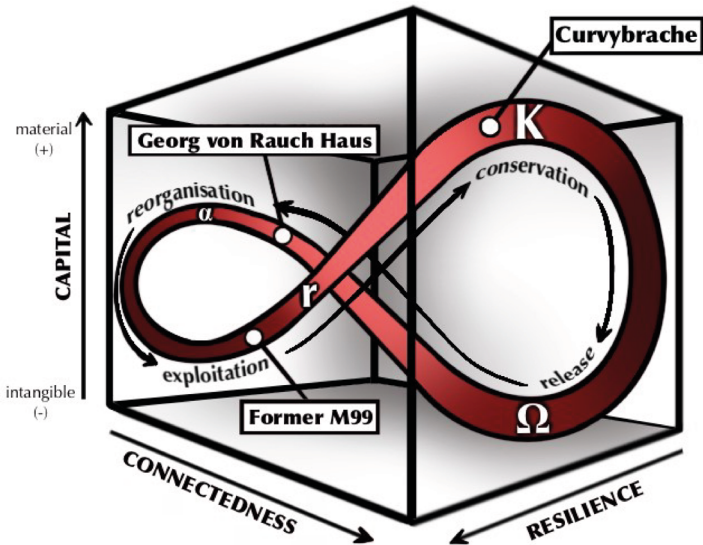


Fig. 2. Examined areas on the adaptive cycle. Source: Authors' own elaboration.

ganization phase, as its spatial persistence has not yet been accompanied by the degree of consolidation characteristic of the subsequent phases. Its present position in *Figure 2* represents an analytical interpretation of its relative persistence, connectedness, and institutionalization rather than a quantitatively measured position within the cycle.

The occupation of the Georg von Rauch Haus (hereinafter referred to as Rauch Haus) at Mariannenplatz 1/A in 1971 represents a crucial element in the symbolic release of this tension, which exhibited an exponentially rising trend over the following decade (*Photo 1*). “Friede den Hütten – Krieg den Palästen” (*Peace to the huts – war on the palaces*) – stands inscribed on the facade of the old building.

The symbolism of the Rauch Haus, which still exists today, is fulfilled in the breakthrough of the emerging revolutionary class

composed of young people. This is evidenced by earlier squats on 1 May, 3 July, and 13 July, 1970, in Reinickendorf, Steglitz, and the southeastern side of Mariannenplatz (Berlin Besetzt, 2025). Following the failure of the aforementioned attempts, the case of the Rauch Haus garnered significant media attention, and the efforts of the newly formed community (‘Die Trebegänger des Georg von Rauch Hauses’) also attracted the attention of the Berlin Senate (KAPPELER, M. and LIEBEL, M. 2022). A strong stance against the injustices of housing policy triggered an increase in the number of squats, leading to a rise in the resilience of Berlin’s autonomous communities and their residential spaces as interpreted in the urban context. Ironically, in the case under examination, the maximum of intangible capital can be understood in terms of the local value of material capital at its minimum, a concept recognized by



Photo 1. The Georg von Rauch Haus. Source: Photo taken by the authors.

literature interpreting HOLLING's theory from an economic perspective as a 'poverty trap.' As intangible capital, symbolic capital plays a crucial role, along with the cultural capital, which is notably overrepresented in Kreuzberg (BOURDRIEU, P. 2008; HUANG, X. 2019), which, in the case we are examining, is style-oriented and politically active, rather than being associated with ethnic groups that represent themselves in the area.

The r-K foreloop can be associated with the increasing incorporation of previously accumulated cultural and symbolic values into market-oriented urban development (HOLLING, C.S. 2001). In Berlin, this process is particularly visible in gentrifying inner-city districts such as Mitte, Prenzlauer Berg, and Kreuzberg, where pioneer gentrification has substantially transformed the built environment (BERNT, M. and HOLM, A. 2013; SIEMER, J. and MATTHEWS-HUNTER, K. 2017). Tourism and short-term rentals represent an additional dimension of this transformation: Airbnb has facilitated the integration of visitors into residential spaces while generating criticism concerning the effects of the sharing economy on urban neighbourhoods (STORS, N. 2022). Such practices extend tourist access into spaces otherwise unavailable to outsiders, potentially generating conflicts over local uses and meanings of space (KAPPELER, M. and LIEBEL, M. 2022).

The second case study is M99, a store operated by Hans-Georg "HG" Lindenau and a long-standing symbolic site of Berlin's countercultural milieu. Unlike the Rauch Haus, this location – and its proprietor – has been severely impacted by Berlin's gentrification activities. The M99 began its operations openly as a revolutionary leftist print shop and bookstore in 1985, located at Manteuffelstraße 99, just two blocks from the Rauch Haus. As a symbol of anti-capitalist resistance, it has endured numerous eviction attempts, police raids, and attacks. In 2015, the landlord unilaterally terminated the lease agreement, and after a prolonged struggle, the M99 was relocated to

Falckensteinstraße 46, with the intervention of the Umverteilen Foundation. The relevance of the placement of the earlier building (see *Figure 2*) is to highlight the spatial aspect of the exploitation of symbolic capital. The depicted moment in time is symbolic, referring to the building after eviction, which has since been absorbed by gentrification. The original location is now occupied by a restaurant. Gentrification commodifies symbolic places through the estrangement of urban spaces. In this case, we observe the triumph of such actions; however, the struggle itself and the presence and activity of the revolutionary class are noteworthy. As Henri LEBEVRE argues in his work "Right to the City", urban space should not be subjected to the control and oppression of market forces. Capitalism and commodification strip away the opportunity for city inhabitants to lead and shape their own living environments (KING, L. 2019).

We can observe that the local population, often reinforced by subcultural groups, actively resists all forms of exploitation in the r-K foreloop. Numerous demonstrations, protests, and various forms of civic resistance attest to Kreuzberg's radical character. Without striving for completeness, we will mention a few key events that illustrate the district's history of resistance since the 1980s: The riots that took place in December 1980 at Kottbusser Tor, along with the so-called Battle of Fraenkelufer on the same evening, and the street clashes on May 1, 1987, marked the awakening of the radical, autonomous creative class (Ω - α phases). However, the activist spirit of local subcultures is not merely a historical phenomenon – the last major resurgence occurred during the so-called "refugee crisis" of the past decade. The characteristic use of urban space for demonstrations evolved into the establishment of activist hotspots focused on aiding refugees and those abandoned by the state. Among these hotspots, we would highlight the Kotti&Co Protesthaus, which operated for years at the Kottbusser Tor intersection from 2012

onward, the civil refugee support center at Oranienplatz, and the house occupation on Ohlauer Straße, which pursued similar objectives. The mobilization of the district's residents remains ongoing; in October 2024, efforts to save Görlitzer Park became a focal point under the slogan “Der Görli bleibt” (Görli stays) (Berlin Besetzt, 2025).

The third and final case study of our research is located in the riverside area of Kreuzberg's SO36 district, at the intersection of Cuvrystraße and Schlesische Straße. Today, visitors to Schlesische Straße 34 are met with the sight of a massive newly built complex. However, looking back a decade, the history of this site has been problematic. Spanning 12,000 m², this plot was one of the last remaining open spaces in Kreuzberg among Berlin's underutilized sites. From the late 1990s, local residents primarily used the area for recreational purposes, as it became

an informal green space hosting subcultural activities. Between 2007 and 2008, numerous internationally renowned street artists created works here, turning the location into a globally recognized landmark (Photo 2). Their artworks adorned the firewalls surrounding the area for nearly a decade (LYDSSAN, Y. 2020; MERRILL, S. 2021).

The site, informally named Cuvrybrache (a fusion of *Cuvrystraße* and the German word *Brache*, meaning vacant land), attracted significant interest from investors. However, development plans repeatedly faced resistance from the local population. Neoliberal gentrification efforts – particularly the Media Spree project – sought to privatize the entire riverfront (SCHARENBERG, A. and BADER, I. 2009). This sparked a large-scale civic campaign titled “Mediaspree Versenken” (Sink Mediaspree), which led to the occupation of the Cuvrybrache site in June 2010 (Novy, J.



Photo 2. Cuvrybrache Wagenplatz. Source: <https://www.orte-der-einheit.de/en/cuvry-brache/>

and COLOMB, C. 2013). Despite decisive police interventions, the eviction attempts proved unsuccessful. By then, the site had evolved into a Wagenplatz (a self-organized community of mobile dwellings), where continuous demonstrations and acts of resistance prevented displacement. Eventually, in 2012, the property owner – an automotive corporation – announced plans to develop the site into a research laboratory focused on urbanization and future housing solutions. However, this initiative also faced resistance from residents, who, recognizing the real estate market impact of gentrification, successfully obstructed the investment. At this point, the population of Cuvrybrache surged. In response to an eviction notice issued in the summer of 2012, hundreds of people took to the streets, ultimately rendering the eviction order void. On 14 September 2014, a fire broke out in the Wagenplatz. Firefighters arrived on the scene, accompanied by the police. Using the chaos caused by the fire, law enforcement executed a surprise eviction of the Cuvrybrache site, rendering its residents homeless. Shortly after the clearance, redevelopment proposals emerged, culminating in the announcement of the Cuvryhöfe project – an exclusive residential complex featuring 250 luxury apartments. The construction has since been completed, aligning with Holling's adaptive cycle, where the phase of exploitation is distinctly identifiable (WOLFGANG, A.C. 2016; LYDSSAN, Y. 2020).

Analyzing the spatial transformation through the lens of system dynamics, the current state of Cuvrybrache corresponds to the conservation phase (K) of the adaptive cycle. The site has been integrated into a rigid urban structure, shaped by gentrification, reflecting the immobility of capitalism in the built environment. This phase represents the longest segment of the adaptive cycle, signifying the site's progression toward a high degree of accumulated potential and structural connectedness within the given urban framework.

Drawing on HOLLING' s theory (2001), we observe that the activities of these groups concentrate subversive forces that ultimately destabilize consolidated spatial arrangements. This destabilization enables rigid structures to regain flexibility, thus, opening pathways for change. Subcultural space production consistently exerts an effect on liminal spaces. Space that has lost its significance cannot remain without claim, whether it involves brownfield areas, vacant rental buildings, or green spaces relegated to the shadow of the wall, such as the Mariannenplatz. Based on this, we can trace the spatial manifestation of the concept of "meaning making."

At the same time, this form of social advocacy, along with the expression of independent cultural and artistic values, is often subjected to exploitation. Economically and productively inactive, nonconformist communities and subcultures – as well as the symbolic spaces and intangible assets they create – are pushed to the periphery of capitalism. As a result, they become subject to expropriation and exploitation (FRASER, N. 2022). Gentrification, as a driving force within the r-phase of the adaptive cycle, serves as a mechanism for this expropriation and exploitation. The homogeneous structure it creates not only displaces the original residents willing to engage in social participation of the area but also its unique character.

The adaptive cycle therefore provides a heuristic for interpreting how increasingly rigid spatial configurations may become vulnerable to disruption and subsequently open possibilities for reorganization.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that subcultural spatial production and gentrification should not be understood as entirely separate or opposing processes. The three cases show that subcultural spatial appropriation involves not only the physical occupation of

space but also the production of cultural and symbolic meanings through collective practices. These meanings may persist beyond the initial act of occupation and accumulate precisely through practices that distinguish these spaces from market-oriented forms of urban development. Yet this accumulated value may subsequently become susceptible to commodification as these spaces gain wider recognition. The cases therefore reveal a tension between the production of alternative use values and their potential incorporation into exchange-oriented urban development. Viewed through the adaptive cycle, this tension is particularly visible in the transition from relatively flexible forms of spatial appropriation towards increasing consolidation. In the urban interpretation developed here, potential includes not only material resources but also cultural, symbolic, and relational forms of capital. The accumulation of such intangible resources can strengthen subcultural spaces and contribute to their persistence, while simultaneously increasing their visibility and potential economic appropriation. Institutionalization may therefore have an ambivalent role: legalization can protect autonomous projects from immediate displacement while also increasing connectedness and reducing some of the flexibility associated with their earlier forms, a process previously conceptualized in SO36 as selective resilience (TILL, D., in press).

In this process, different districts of Berlin are at varying stages (SIEMER, J. and MATTHEWS-HUNTER, K. 2017), additionally, the role of the local population varies in degree. Kreuzberg can be considered active in this regard, as the area's significant accumulation of intangible capital indicates strong, present communities who are currently grappling with the real estate market effects of gentrification (BERNT, M. and HOLM, A. 2013).

The comparison of the three cases indicates that transformations at individual sites are embedded within broader neighbourhood- and city-level processes. The processes

occurring in Kreuzberg can be associated with different phases of the adaptive cycle rather than with a single uniform trajectory. The occupied houses, and other autonomous spaces coexist with highly commercialized and redeveloped areas, demonstrating that different spatial configurations may persist simultaneously within the same neighbourhood. The diversity of the district's urban landscape becomes particularly striking as one moves away from the Spree riverside blocks toward the inner streets.

The three cases demonstrate that different spatial configurations may coexist within the same neighbourhood, while their trajectories remain embedded in broader processes of gentrification, housing policy, and institutional change. This also marks the analytical boundary between the adaptive cycle and panarchy. While the former is used here to interpret transformations within individual sites, panarchy draws attention to cross-scale interactions between site-, neighbourhood-, and city-level processes. The adaptive cycle, thus, provides a useful heuristic for interpreting non-linear urban transformation, although the qualitative application of potential, connectedness, and resilience allows analytical rather than quantitatively determined positioning within the cycle. These findings extend previous urban applications of the adaptive cycle to shrinking cities, multilevel urban resilience, and community-based renewal (HERRMANN, D. *et al.* 2016; ROGOV, M. and ROZENBLAT, C. 2018; SAEZ UJAQUE, D. *et al.* 2021). The SO36 cases demonstrate that the model can also illuminate transformations at the scale of contested subcultural sites, where spatial appropriation, institutionalization, displacement, and commodification interact over time.

The combination of SoJA and HOLLING provides complementary spatial and temporal perspectives on these transformations (SoJA, E.W. 1996; HOLLING, C.S. 2001). SoJA's framework explains how material conditions and accumulated social meanings contribute to the production of subcultural space, while

the adaptive cycle provides a temporal heuristic for interpreting its emergence, consolidation, disruption, and reorganization. In SO36, this combination demonstrates why physical transformation does not necessarily erase historically accumulated spatial meanings.

Conclusions

This study examined whether the transformation of subcultural spaces in Kreuzberg SO36 can be interpreted through HOLLING's adaptive cycle (HOLLING, C.S. 2001), and how these transformations relate to intangible capital, institutionalization, and commodification. The findings broadly support the four hypotheses. The contrasting trajectories of the Georg von Rauch Haus, M99, and Cuvrybrache demonstrate that subcultural spaces can be associated with different phases of the adaptive cycle, although their positions represent qualitative interpretations rather than quantitatively determined states.

The cases also support the proposed relationship between the accumulation of intangible capital and the emergence and consolidation of subcultural spaces. Increasing institutionalization and commodification are associated with stronger connectedness and the conversion of some accumulated symbolic and cultural value into material or economic value, while potentially constraining transformative capacity. However, these relationships are not deterministic: legalization and institutionalization may restrict autonomy while simultaneously enabling the long-term persistence of alternative spaces. Finally, the cases indicate that gentrification can incorporate cultural and symbolic values produced within subcultural spaces into market-oriented urban development, most clearly where formerly alternative spaces become economically exploitable through their accumulated meanings and recognition.

The adaptive cycle therefore provides a useful framework for interpreting the tem-

poral transformation of contested urban spaces without assuming a linear trajectory from resistance to commodification. In SO36, persistence, institutionalization, displacement, and redevelopment instead represent divergent outcomes of an ongoing process of socio-spatial transformation.

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