

Spatial Politics of Cultural Production: Negotiating Workspaces and Resisting Displacement at Industrial Heritage Sites in Berlin

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Abstract

Derelict industrial spaces have been crucial spatial resources for artists and cultural production for decades, often forming vibrant cultural clusters. However, these spaces are increasingly threatened by speculative real-estate development and displacement through more “productive” creative industries. The case of Alte Münze in Berlin provides empirical insight into the politics, practices, and strategies essential for preserving these heritage sites in the long term for cultural use. This research underscores the need for supportive planning regulations that combine cultural policy with urban planning, advocate for public-civic partnerships, and promote public or community-based ownership models. The findings extend to small-scale manufacturers and businesses facing similar challenges in maintaining workspaces amid competitive urban land use pressures.

Keywords

cultural clusters; cultural production; displacement; industrial heritage; spatial cultural policy; workspaces

1. Introduction

Workspace provision for cultural production has historically been neglected in both cultural policy and urban planning. Yet, affordable workspaces and housing are critical material conditions that facilitate and shape cultural production (Bingham-Hall & Kaasa, 2018; Farías & Wilkie, 2016; Williams, 1993) and help promote equity and inclusion within the cultural sector. Industrial heritage sites have been critical resources for affordable workspaces (Andres & Grésillon, 2013; Wijngaarden & Hrac, 2024) but face increasing displacement due to redevelopment and gentrification (Pollio et al., 2021; Shaw, 2013). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the situation, with many artists giving up their workspaces due to economic

insecurities and inadequate support. The affordability crisis for workspaces is now considered the most significant threat to cultural development and production in cities (BOP, 2018).

This article examines workspace struggles in Berlin based on the single case study of Alte Münze, revealing emerging policies and strategies for maintaining industrial heritage sites as affordable cultural workspaces (Pollio et al., 2021). It argues that developments at Alte Münze reflect a shift in policy that challenges the transient nature of cultural clusters in such sites (Boswinkel & van Meerkerk, 2023; Krivý, 2013). The first section of this article reviews the literature on cultural production at industrial heritage sites, the spatial struggles of artists and cultural workers in urban environments, and recent policy developments. The second section presents the findings of the case study analysis, and the third section discusses the conclusions drawn from this analysis.

2. Cultural Production at Industrial Heritage Sites

In recent decades, derelict industrial heritage, such as disused factories and warehouses, has been a critical spatial resource for cultural production. Industrial spaces have provided “affective atmospheres” (Wijngaarden & Hracs, 2024) and material and symbolic assets for many independent cultural producers (Gainza, 2018; Hutton, 2006; Zielke & Waibel, 2015; Zukin, 1982) in various spatial contexts, from urban to rural areas. Their spaciousness and adaptability facilitate multiple artistic practices and uses, while also allowing for noisy, dirty, large-scale, and complex work. As these workspaces are often located on the periphery, they remained affordable. Andres and Grésillon (2013) discuss these vacant industrial sites as cultural brownfields that play a substantial role in cultural development strategies and “creative city” aspirations for “altering the perception of a deindustrialized vacant land and becoming part of the contemporary post-industrial cityscape” (Gainza, 2018, p. 794).

Research underscores the temporary and transient nature of cultural uses in industrial heritage sites (Gainza, 2018; Mould & Comunian, 2015). Cities often instrumentalise these spaces and their temporariness, using cultural production for urban production (Boswinkel & van Meerkerk, 2023; Cossu, 2022). Thus, Andres and Golubchikov (2016) argue that artists are usually co-opted agents, mere “cleaners of derelict brownfields” (p. 771), with these spaces only serving as “soft infrastructure of creativity” (p. 760). They assert that while these spaces are utilised as breeding grounds for grassroots creativity, artists’ engagement with these sites is often temporary and operational rather than lasting and strategic. The evolution of cultural brownfields typically leads either to their adaptation into less contentious spaces included in urban policy or to their eventual disappearance (Andres & Grésillon, 2013; Vivant, 2022). Investments and urban redevelopment strategies have often prioritised spaces for cultural consumption—such as performance or exhibition venues—over spaces for cultural production (Mould & Comunian, 2015). This raises the question: Do cultural clusters at industrial heritage sites always have to remain “liminal spaces of the post-industrial city in the margins of both, the built environment and the social imaginary” (Gainza, 2018, p. 794)? While there is a great deal of research on how cultural clusters emerge in brownfields (Andres & Grésillon, 2013; Lidegaard et al., 2018), there is little on how these sites can be maintained in the long term as a cultural cluster—here understood as the spatial clustering of cultural production activities (Chapain & Sagot-Duvaurox, 2020; Pratt, 2008)—or on the spatial needs, practices, and processes of artists and cultural workers in affordable workspace development.

3. Spatial Struggles and Spatial Inequalities of Artists and Cultural Workers

Virginia Woolf (1929/2002) famously argued in her essay *A Room of One's Own* that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (p. 4). In contemporary cities, sustaining both conditions—a sufficient income and a dedicated workspace—is increasingly challenging for cultural workers. In Berlin, for instance, it is reported that 90% of the city’s 9,500 visual artists cannot rely on their artistic income alone and require additional sources of income (Schwegmann et al., 2021, p. 27). Similarly, 80% of artists in Toronto cannot earn a living wage (Toronto Arts Foundation, 2019, p. 3). These statistics highlight the pervasive economic precarity among cultural practitioners, illustrating the critical combination of financial stability and workspace accessibility in supporting creative livelihoods.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic and its profound impacts on freelance and self-employed cultural workers, there was growing criticism from artists’ advocacy groups regarding their displacement and disenfranchisement from urban centres. These collective protests underscored the acute challenges surrounding the affordability of housing and the availability of suitable workspaces, particularly in cities recognised as global art hubs. For instance, in New York City, discontent culminated in the drafting of *The People’s Cultural Plan for Working Artists and Communities* (PCP, 2017). This initiative challenged the inadequacy of housing and workspace provisions in the city’s official cultural strategy amidst the cost of living crisis. Similarly, in Berlin, the newly formed Coalition of the Independent Arts emerged as a vocal advocate, critiquing the marginalisation of cultural work in traditional policy debates and highlighting the pressing issues of affordable workspace scarcity and displacement (Berlin Visit, 2014; Landau, 2019). In many cities, arts squatting has emerged as a tangible manifestation of these spatial struggles (d’Ovidio & Cossu, 2017; Moore & Smart, 2015; Vivant, 2022).

Artists and cultural workers have long contended with challenges in securing affordable housing and workspaces in urban environments, rendering them particularly vulnerable and reliant on their ability to navigate spatial constraints (Anderson, 1996; Bain & March, 2019; Shkuda, 2015; Williams, 1993). Despite these ongoing struggles, supportive policy initiatives have been introduced in some instances. In New York’s Soho district, artists advocated to legalise their live-work studios in industrial lofts, ultimately influencing zoning laws to convert these spaces from illegal housing into legal residences (Shkuda, 2015; Zukin, 1982). Many cities have introduced artist housing initiatives (Strom, 2010), provided subsidised rent schemes (Hoe, 2020; Pruijt, 2013), or zoned arts and entertainment districts (Rich & Tsitsos, 2016). Cultural philanthropy can also play an important role in offering stability to the local art community (Bain & March, 2019). Despite such municipal and philanthropic interventions, artists still face significant challenges in securing adequate workspaces.

Artists’ survival and adaptation strategies to pressure on land use remain understudied. Anderson (1996) discusses cooperative housing as a strategy for artists to control their living and working environments. Bain (2018) explores how property ownership shields artists from market pressures. Pollio et al. (2021) examine spatial adaptation strategies and solidarity economies among artists in Sydney. Williams (2019) illustrates how guild-like structures facilitate mutual support through spatial co-location and resource sharing, while squatting has also been employed to secure disinvested properties as workspaces (Moore & Smart, 2015; Pruijt, 2013; Vivant, 2022). In Paris, many art squats were then legalised through public domain occupancy agreements with artist collectives. However, these agreements introduced expectations with regard to artist

professionalisation and fostered competition among art groups, diluting artistic critique in “the new spirit of capitalist urban planning” (Vivant, 2022, p. 8).

The recent shortage of workspaces is primarily attributed to the loss of informal spaces in former industrial sites (Curran, 2010; March, 2020; Ross, 2022), which are being repurposed into residential or commercial developments and often cater to more “productive” creative and cultural industries (Sprague & Rantisi, 2019). The workspace crisis became more pressing during the pandemic, with many artists relocating their workspaces to their homes and relinquishing their studio spaces (Marquardt & Hübgen, 2021; Musicboard Berlin, 2021).

4. Affordable Workspace Provision as New Spatial Cultural Policies

Rising spatial inequalities in access to affordable workspaces for artists have been increasingly discussed over the past ten years (Merkel, 2023; Moreton, 2013; Pollio et al., 2021; Shaw, 2013). The insecure and vulnerable workspace situation is due to short-term rents, financial pressure from the cost-of-living crisis, a lack of ownership among artists, and imminent threats of (re)development (Ferm et al., 2022; Pollio et al., 2021; Scott, 2022). Newly created spaces are often unsuitable and commercial leases are subject to commercial lease law, which usually provides less protection. For instance, in Germany, commercial leases have shorter notice periods and no caps on rent increases. Moreover, artists often invest in refurbishing their workspace to suit their needs (Pollio et al., 2018, p. 7).

Many cities acknowledge the workspace problem, often in conjunction with the broader displacement and loss of performance venues and clubs (BOP, 2018). They aim to develop new strategies and policies for the spatial provision of cultural spaces. These plans signify a remarkable shift as they employ planning instruments and regulations to protect existing cultural spaces and facilitate the creation of new cultural infrastructures amidst the pressures of finance-led (re)development and the resulting gentrification (Aalbers, 2019). These new policy guidelines evolve at the intersection of cultural policy and planning and aim to enhance access to affordable workspaces, rehearsal spaces, and performance venues for artists, while also safeguarding existing spaces. For example, London has developed comprehensive guidelines with a *Cultural Infrastructure Plan* (GLA, 2019) and established a Creative Land Trust to secure the creation of long-term affordable workspaces (Creative Land Trust, 2020). Similarly, the Cultural Affairs Office in Cologne commissioned a report on new planning guidelines for safeguarding cultural spaces and outlined how planning instruments at various scales (building, neighbourhood, city) can protect existing cultural spaces and foster new developments (Dewey Muller, 2020).

Despite these efforts, workspaces for cultural production are seldom discussed and often marginalised in cultural policies, receiving minimal resources, especially compared to public subsidies allocated for high art institutions. However, the scarcity of affordable and suitable workspaces impacts artists’ ability to work and maintain artistic quality. Furthermore, the loss of each studio not only reduces the physical space available for cultural production but also disrupts the relation networks and the broader cultural ecosystem of the city (Ferm et al., 2022; Karimnia & Kostourou, 2023; Shaw, 2013). These broader implications for urban cultural economies are rarely discussed.

5. Methodology

This research began with a broad exploratory research question aimed at understanding current developments in cultural workspace provision in Berlin and the role of planning and cultural policy in this context. Adopting an inductive, exploratory qualitative case study approach (Stake, 2005), the aim was to develop a detailed contextual understanding of each case, the stakeholders and their positions, and the negotiation processes related to several industrial heritage sites in Berlin. Alte Münze was chosen as a single case for this article because it exemplifies a shift in cultural policy in Berlin regarding the use of inner-city industrial heritage as long-term cultural workspaces and new formations of actors challenging and negotiating the city's cultural policy. As the events were widely reported on and comprehensive documentation of the process is available, the case study is mainly based on document analysis with a focus on content (Prior, 2003) and complemented with participant observations and informal interviews conducted over the past seven years. It builds on past research on art activism and cultural policy development in Berlin (Landau & Merkel, 2019; Merkel, 2015). The reported insights are based on the analysis of secondary sources, primarily protocols from the Berlin parliament's cultural committee meetings that have negotiated the political reimagining of Alte Münze since 2017, official documentation of the participation process in 2019, 27 articles from four local newspapers (*Berliner Morgenpost*, *Berliner Zeitung*, *Tagesspiegel*, and *taz*), and stakeholder publications (i.e., concept studies, press releases). Additional data were derived from media interviews with relevant stakeholders, websites, studies on workspace provision in Berlin, informal conversations with artists and art activists during site visits, and public fora during the planning process in 2019. These unplanned, "accidental" interviews helped to contextualise decisions and events, gather better data, and understand individuals' experiences and perceptions of the process (Swain & King, 2022). If quotes are used, the author translated all of the texts and interviews.

The data analysis for analysing agenda-setting in policy processes is based on the multiple streams framework (MSF) approach (Kingdon, 1984). MFS views public policy as dynamic and complex, subject to ambiguity and uncertainty (Cairney & Jones, 2016), and identifies three distinct streams in policy formulation: problems, policies, and politics. These streams must converge during a brief "window of opportunity" in order for policy to change (Cairney & Jones, 2016, p. 39). Policy entrepreneurs who invest resources and reputation in their preferred projects facilitate the convergence of these streams. These entrepreneurs, who may hold formal or informal positions, possess persuasion and negotiation skills, connections, authority, and expertise and can come from bureaucracies, political parties, NGOs, or local communities (Herweg et al., 2018). MSF is used as a heuristic to understand the agenda setting behind the case of Alte Münze and to explain why it eventually missed the "window of opportunity" for policy change. The thematic, emergent coding of the documents (Kuckartz, 2018) focused on the stakeholders, as well as their interests, positions, and points of contention, to retrace the negotiations to maintain Alte Münze as a cultural workspace.

5.1. Berlin's Workspace Funding Programme Since 2016

Over the past three decades, Berlin has attracted artists with its abundance of disused industrial spaces, affordable housing, vibrant cultural scenes, and supportive art and cultural policy (Colomb, 2012; Grésillon, 1999; Marguin, 2015; Merkel, 2015). Since 2008, however, dissent among artists regarding urban development and the sale of public land has grown, with protests against projects like the Mediaspree property investment project (Novy & Colomb, 2013; Weber-Newth, 2019). Discontent peaked with the

controversial 2011 “Made in Berlin” art showcase, uniting artists against budget imbalances and workspace loss (Merkel, 2015). Since then, several campaigns highlighted the increasing loss of affordable workspaces in Berlin’s former industrial sites. Artists’ symbolic occupation of Haus der Statistik in 2015 (Berg, 2019), an empty high-rise at Alexanderplatz, was a pivotal moment that brought the issue to the political forefront, ultimately contributing to a renewed workspace program in 2016.

Berlin is estimated to lose 350 artist studios annually due to industrial building conversions and rising rents. At the same time, there is demand for over 10,000 new studios and workspaces (Schwegmann et al., 2021, p. 27). Recent studies from art organisations underline the severity of the issue. A survey of 1,673 visual artists revealed that 25% of artists cannot afford a studio, 33% are interim tenants at risk of losing their space, and 87% are actively searching for a new studio, most of them currently without one (BBK Kulturwerk, 2023). A third of the artists with studios indicated that losing their space would likely force them to leave Berlin. The situation is similarly dire for musicians, with 50% of Berlin’s 9,000 professional musicians seeking rehearsal spaces (Musicboard Berlin, 2021). A survey of 663 artists in performing arts, music, and literature found that 50% are searching for new workspaces, while 25% have abandoned the search due to financial constraints (Marguin et al., 2023).

With the new government coalition in 2016, safeguarding and developing cultural (work)spaces assumed a prominent role, marking a shift towards a new cultural infrastructure policy (SPD, 2016). This policy is founded on three pillars.

First, in the short term, the existing workspace programme (*Arbeitsraumprogramm*) will be expanded to allow artists to apply for subsidised studios. This approach is based on borrowed infrastructure, with cities leasing long-term commercial workspaces as general contractors and then subsidising rents (Scott, 2022). This model has recently been used to safeguard Uferhallen, a studio complex in Berlin with over 80 ateliers and rehearsal spaces (SenKultGZ, 2024c). While the Senate of Berlin intends to subsidise more than 5,000 workspaces by 2030, it had only 1,852 in 2022 (SenKultGZ, 2024a, p. 6).

Second, new cultural workspaces will be created only on public properties to avoid subsidising rising rents, a strategy deemed more sustainable and effective (SenKultGZ, 2024a, p. 3). Developing workspaces on vacant public properties is a long-term strategy as they first need to be assessed for suitability, most need substantial renovation, and they are often listed buildings (SenKultGZ, 2024a, pp. 8–9). In 2018 an acquisition fund (SIWANA IV) was established within the Special Investment Fund for Infrastructure of the Growing City and Sustainability (SIWANA), allocating a EUR 20 million budget for cultural acquisitions (SenFin, 2018). Another long-term goal is to revive studio flats for artists in public housing and to facilitate more workspaces on public commercial and industrial properties (SenStadt, 2019).

Third, due to political pressure from artists and their collectives, a new administrative unit, the *Kultur Räume Berlin* alliance (Cultural Spaces Berlin), was created in 2021 to oversee the new infrastructure policy. This has given rise to complex horizontal governance structures between various art organisations and the public administration. This multifaceted approach represents a significant advancement in Berlin’s cultural infrastructure policy, emphasising the collaborative efforts between government entities and artists to address the need for affordable, long-term cultural workspaces.

6. Case Study: Alte Münze

Alte Münze (Figure 1), a former state-owned mint that ceased operations in 2006, exemplifies several industrial heritage sites in Berlin's inner city claimed by artists and cultural workers as publicly owned, permanent cultural production sites. However, in contrast to many other sites (e.g., Uferhallen, B.L.O.Ateliers), Alte Münze is still publicly owned. After two unsuccessful attempts to sell the entire site to private property developers in 2008 and 2011—both of which proposed luxury housing and “creative quarter” developments—the sale option was abandoned due to a political shift in the approach to public land use and property tenders (Silomon-Pflug & Heeg, 2013). The remaining public properties are being reassessed to determine their cultural potential and must be reviewed by a committee. This policy shift reflects a broader trend in urban governance, emphasising the importance of preserving cultural spaces within the public domain and ensuring that redevelopment projects align with the government's cultural and social objectives.

Since 2009, Alte Münze has been utilised for interim purposes, such as events, festivals, and workspaces, with contracts having to be renewed every six months. In 2015, Berlin's state-owned company for public real-estate management, Berliner Immobilienmanagement GmbH (BIM), assumed management and maintenance of the site. By 2017, the property was incorporated into a new public property trust (SODA, Sondervermögen für Daseinsvorsorge), which assembles properties for public use and prohibits their sale. With 15,500 square meters across four buildings, including 6,600 square meters underground, the site offers substantial flexibility for various uses. The central location across from the Red Town Hall in Berlin-Mitte enhances its real-estate value and political significance (Urban Catalyst, 2020).



Figure 1. Alte Münze, Berlin. Source: Nineties.berlin (2018).

In 2016, the Federal Government proposed utilising the property as a “House of Jazz,” commissioning a feasibility study and allocating EUR 12.5 million for the project. However, the Senate Department for Culture responded cautiously, preferring to secure work and rehearsal spaces for independent musicians and employ a participatory planning process to develop a new use concept. In a decisive move, the Berlin House of Representatives passed a resolution to secure the former mint as a “cultural and creative site” (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, 2018a). It allocated EUR 35 million for the initial phase of renovations. The parliament insisted on a participatory process to draft a concept for the site, ensuring it remains “close to the scene and efficient” (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, 2018a, p. 4). The governing coalition agreed to use Alte Münze as a production site, rejecting other proposals such as a new museum.

Several key stakeholders are involved in the Alte Münze case (see Table 1). The Spreewerkstätten, a private company and the most significant interim users since 2014, occupy nearly half of the building. They have renovated significant parts of the site, including updating electrical systems, installing heating, and creating contemporary event spaces, funded by event income and “sweat equity.” With over 100 workers in its various companies and more than 20 ateliers, Spreewerkstätten aims to maintain its workspaces and pursue long-term “organic growth” (Urban Catalyst, 2020, p. 16). AG Alte Münze, part of the Coalition of the Independent Arts, is the second stakeholder advocating for the site to be entirely dedicated to the needs of independent artists. The third stakeholder, based in the Direktorenhaus exhibition house since 2010, has a design background and seeks to establish a “design forum” at the site. Along with Riverside Studios, they developed the “Haus of Berlin” concept to showcase the city’s creative talent.

Public actors include the Senate Department for Culture, which seeks to enhance the cultural infrastructure by creating new workspaces (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, 2018a). BIM manages and maintains the site, focusing on renovations and cost management for sustainable operation. The Berlin House of Representatives has supported securing the site for cultural use and allocated funds for renovation.

Table 1. Stakeholders, objectives, and bargaining power in negotiations related to Alte Münze.

| Actors | Description | Objectives | Bargaining power |
|-------------------------|---|---|---|
| Spreewerkstätten | Interim users since 2014, cultural enterprise renting spaces for artists, events, and exhibitions Both a company and a recently created association to underline a non-commercial approach | Keep site after having renovated substantial parts with “sweat equity” Gain a long-term perspective for their different cultural event businesses on the site | Current user with successful business model for workspaces and events Developed Buildings 1, 3, and 4 Local spatial knowledge |
| AG Alte Münze | Artists’ interest group composed of the Coalition of the Independent Arts in Berlin | Maintain and secure the site for artists and cultural workers with affordable workspaces and 100% cultural use of the location Participatory process to decide on future uses Alte Münze as public property and common good | Influences decisions by means of personal relations, mobilising media and protests |

Table 1. (Cont.) Stakeholders, objectives, and bargaining power in negotiations related to Alte Münze.

| Actors | Description | Objectives | Bargaining power |
|--|--|---|---|
| CCI Actors | Interim user design museums Direktorenhaus since 2010, Riverside Studios, and Meisterrat Berlin-Brandenburg e.V. | Create a design forum with a focus on artistic crafts and design Maintain and secure the site for designers with affordable workspaces | Influences decisions by means of personal relations |
| Senate Department for Culture and Europe (since 2023: Senate Department for Culture and Social Cohesion) | Responsible authority | Promote the arts Develop new cultural production spaces Focus on independent performing artists and musicians A self-governing and sustainable project with a cost-neutral, mixed-use approach | Political responsibility for Alte Münze Policies Allocates funds |
| BIM | Berlin's state-owned property service for public real-estate management in Berlin | Create a cultural infrastructure that is self-sufficient and able to create reserves for maintaining buildings | Operational responsibility for Alte Münze Controls land use and collects rent Approves renovations and leases |
| Berlin House of Representatives | Berlin state parliament | Develop Alte Münze as a "cultural and creative site" | Policies Allocates funds |
| Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media | Support arts of national interest and cultural infrastructure development | Federal government owns two properties in the complex Favour a "House of Jazz" and reserved substantial financial help for it | Owns two buildings at the site Allocates funds |
| IG Jazz | Represents 350 actors from the jazz and new music scene in Berlin | Creation of a new anchor institution for the jazz and new music scene | Negotiated directly with the federal and state government to develop a "House of Jazz" |
| Berlin Monument Authority | Berlin's state authority for the preservation of historical monuments | Heritage protection | Alte Münze protected as a listed building |

The German Federal Government owns two buildings on the site. It plans to develop a "House of Jazz" and has reserved a federal funding package of EUR 12.5 million and negotiated directly with stakeholders from the jazz and new music scene, IG Jazz. As Alte Münze is a listed building, the Berlin Monument Authority is also a crucial stakeholder.

The requested planning process, conducted from February to June 2019, involved 20 designated stakeholders and an additional 20 participants from the public, chosen by lot (Urban Catalyst, 2020, p. 23). The aim was to develop a sustainable use concept for the various buildings and spaces. As the former Senator for Culture explained, “the property does not have to yield profits, but provisions should be formed from the revenues, which allow continuous maintenance of the property” (Urban Catalyst, 2020, p. 10). Potential uses were categorised into different “spatial talents” of the site, and a joint charter was created to guide the site’s future use (Urban Catalyst, 2020, pp. 40–49).

Two significant points of contention emerged during the workshops. First, there were conflicting ideas about the kind of cultural production to be prioritised and who was most in need. The parliament’s resolution called for a “cultural and creative site” (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, 2018a), a vague definition that invites various interpretations. For example, AG Alte Münze advocated for independent artists and non-commercial uses, emphasising their vulnerability in contemporary urban development processes. Meanwhile, CCI actors argued that workers in the design sector, too, require affordable workspaces, and Spreewerkstätten aimed to maintain their events and exhibitions. Most stakeholders, especially the Berlin Senate, excluded creative industries (i.e., IT, advertisement or design after the German definitions for culture and creative industries; see BMWK, 2022) from the outset and argued against a single private business to manage the site.

The second point of contention was how to bridge the funding gap between affordable rents for artists and the revenue needed to maintain the buildings sustainably without regular public subsidies. Given the site’s capacity for various activities, a workable financial model would require a mixed-use concept to mutually subsidise affordable workspaces with more revenue-generating activities (i.e., club or live music venue) and an innovative governance structure to sustain it. The final recommendation proposed a non-profit governance structure with a supervisory body and bottom-up governance mechanisms (Urban Catalyst, 2020, p. 53).

Following the planning phase, the Senate Department for Culture evaluated the findings and advocated a music-centric vision for the site. This proposal incorporated the federal government’s concept of a “House of Jazz” as an anchor tenant, featuring concert halls and production and rehearsal spaces for musicians, with 75% of the site dedicated to production areas. However, this plan conflicted with the principle of self-sufficiency. The building, suitable for intensive commercial use, would necessitate subsidies rather than generating income to cross-finance affordable workspaces across the entire site.

Progress has stalled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a political shift towards a more conservative city government since 2023, and a significant rise in construction and renovation costs in recent project evaluations (SenKultGZ, 2024a). Existing interim users have benefited from this delay, preserving their self-management and creative independence, which may strengthen their future position. However, given the current government’s conservative stance and newly imposed austerity measures, the immediate future of the project and the workspace program remains uncertain. The new Senate Department for Culture and Social Cohesion announced plans to rent the whole site long term to Spreewerkstätten and forgo renovations, which has caused widespread protests by many art organisations and resulted in stakeholder hearings in the parliament’s cultural committee (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, 2024; SenKultGZ, 2024a). Furthermore, the new coalition treaty lacks concrete goals for workspace provision (Senatskanzlei, 2023), and Alte Münze has been removed from the Senate’s infrastructure project list (SenKultGZ, 2024b).

7. Discussion: Negotiating Workspaces and a Missed Window of Opportunity

7.1. Problem Stream: Acknowledging the Political Relevance of Workspace Provision

Only a few problems catch policymakers' attention, and a shift can be operationalised through three mechanisms: changes in indicators, focusing events (including disasters, personal experiences, and symbols), and feedback (Herweg et al., 2018, pp. 21–22). In the case of Alte Münze, several mechanisms were evident. First, in 2014, a Senate-commissioned study highlighted the dire workspace situation for artists, raising political awareness and illustrating the problem in numbers (Der Regierende Bürgermeister von Berlin, 2014). Second, the symbolic occupation of Haus der Statistik in 2015 broadened public debate on the scarcity of artist workspaces (Berg, 2019). Third, the strong organisation of artists in the city resulted in numerous protest campaigns, events, and advocacy efforts, bringing the material working conditions of independent cultural workers into the political and public spheres (Landau, 2019). When the new government coalition was formed in 2016, the issue of workspace provision had already gained political relevance and aligned with other urban planning problems. Consequently, the coalition treaty acknowledged workspace provision as a critical issue: "Spaces for culture are particularly subject to the pressure of commercialisation in a booming city. Berlin's cultural and creative professionals will continue to need sufficient space at favourable conditions and in suitable surroundings in the future" (SPD, 2016, p. 122). Moreover, it suggested that public properties "should be utilised, converted or repurposed for cultural purposes" (SPD, 2016, p. 122), laying the foundation for claims to use Alte Münze as a production space.

7.2. Policy Stream: Developing Solutions

While attention swiftly shifts from issue to issue, viable solutions require time to develop and gain acceptance within policy networks. Alternatives are discussed "until a limited number of viable policy alternatives emerges" (Herweg et al., 2018, p. 23). Policy entrepreneurs are crucial in this process, characterised by persistence, political connections, access to policymakers, and negotiation skills (Kingdon, 1984, p. 190). Several policy entrepreneurs were instrumental: individuals from AG Alte Münze, the Senator of Finance, a Green Party member who previously was the spokesperson for culture, and the cultural administration who negotiated solutions with various stakeholders. Several challenges needed to be overcome: financial, technical, and conceptual. Initially, there were no viable instruments, such as funds to repurchase properties for cultural use or to support extensive renovations needed to transform Alte Münze into a self-sufficient project.

Furthermore, the Senate Department for Culture lacked experience in developing a project of this magnitude, particularly regarding the extensive, necessary renovations and the complex governance arrangements with new stakeholders in Berlin's Alliance for Cultural Spaces and Alte Münze (Table 1). Furthermore, stakeholders had diverging ideas regarding the use of Alte Münze, ranging from events-based programming (Spreewerkstätten) and affordable workspaces for independent artists (AG Alte Münze) to a new anchor institution for the new music scene (IG Jazz). Hence, planning was crucial for facilitating stakeholder negotiations and identifying a shared concept and viable solutions.

7.3. Political Stream: Turning Solutions Into Policies

Governments and legislatures play a critical role in translating solutions into policy in the political stream. Kingdon (1984) observed that policy windows open with shifts in government composition, parliamentary changes, or national mood shifts. In 2016, the coalition of the Social Democratic Party, Left Party, and Green Party acknowledged the workspace issue in their agenda (SPD, 2016, p. 123). They proposed solutions tied to the preservation of public properties, building on the transparent public property policy initiated in the early 2010s (Silomon-Pflug & Heeg, 2013). In addition, the 2014 public referendum on the former Tempelhof airport signalled a shift in public opinion, reflecting increased politicisation of neoliberal urban planning efforts (Hilbrandt, 2017).

Initially, the workspace provision problem was effectively integrated into the policy environment. The Berlin parliament steered the process with a resolution that mandated a cultural use for Alte Münze and a public participation process to develop a use concept. It assigned responsibility to the Senate Department for Culture (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, 2018b). Seeking rapid progress, a participatory planning process was commissioned and heavily criticised for its demanding workload and tight deadlines (Urban Catalyst, 2020, p. 60). Within five months, the 40 participants had developed recommendations for a mixed-use concept, a charter with guiding principles, governance structures with participatory decision-making, and a viable funding mix (see Urban Catalyst, 2020, pp. 41–53).

Upon reviewing the recommendations, the Senate Department for Culture unexpectedly endorsed the federal government's proposal for a "House of Jazz" to establish a new anchor institution for jazz and experimental music (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, 2020). The decision was justified by the "mature concept" for "a sector in need" and the federal government's commitment to contribute the allocated EUR 12.5 million to the running costs and project funding of such an institution (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, 2020, p. 4). The contentious decision faced opposition from various stakeholders as it contradicted the Senate's previous position against creating new institutions requiring continuous subsidies. Furthermore, it undermined the financial strategy intended to support Alte Münze as a non-commercial production space because the allocation of Building 4 would disrupt the planned funding mix and revenue-generating capacities. This new concept effectively prioritised the redevelopment of a single building and closed the policy window for comprehensive site redevelopment and further negotiations with the stakeholders.

Support for the project diminished as the government had to mitigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the election of a more conservative government in May 2023, focus shifted towards the need for more clubs and a vibrant night-time economy (Senatskanzlei, 2023, p. 105), reflecting the "event-logic of cultural supply" (d'Ovidio & Cossu, 2017, p. 12) in the neoliberal creative city. The Senate Department for Culture now favours a long-term lease (30 years) for the interim user, who runs event-based businesses, even ending plans for the "House of Jazz" at this site (SenKultGZ, 2024a). Responsibilities for the property have already been transferred back to BIM (SenKultGZ, 2024a, p. 26). This proposal relinquishes political control over the site's development, allowing a single business to dominate this central location.

7.4. A Missed Window of Opportunity

When the Berlin parliament adopted the resolution on 17 May 2018 (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, 2018b), a critical juncture occurred where the three streams—problems, policies, and politics—converged, allowing for a resolution to guide the process until the new government cancelled it in 2023 (SenKultGZ, 2024a, p. 25). Policy entrepreneurs from the governing parties and stakeholders primarily facilitated this convergence. However, it later became evident that, despite the resolution, there were still too many potential solutions to decisively guide the development of Alte Münze as a cultural and creative site.

Another critical juncture was the participatory planning process, which produced several guidelines that informed subsequent decision-making in the Senate Department for Culture and the House of Representatives Cultural Committee. Despite contrasting ideas for Alte Münze (Urban Catalyst, 2020, p. 16), the planning process was characterised by a pragmatic approach among participants to overcome their vested interests in the site, as illustrated by the adopted charter (Urban Catalyst, 2020, p. 41). As one participant commented: “We want to give the site a history and an image, which lasts longer than our engagement, our voluntary, unpaid ‘expensive hobby’” (Urban Catalyst, 2020, p. 61).

However, the CCI stakeholder later filed a lawsuit against the government, claiming their interests as an intermediate user had not been sufficiently taken into consideration (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, 2019, p. 28). Ultimately, financial constraints and shifting policy priorities under the new government closed the policy window for a collaborative development approach that would prioritise arts and cultural production while reclaiming public properties as long-term workspaces.

Despite the missed policy window, the negotiation process regarding Alte Münze underscores key points for broader discussions on how industrial heritage sites can be maintained in the long term as cultural clusters. First, it demonstrates the need for a supportive policy environment to transform a temporary “soft infrastructure of creativity” into a more permanent “hard infrastructure” (Andres & Golubchikov, 2016, p. 760). The agenda-setting phase successfully mobilised stakeholders from Senate departments (Culture, Finance, Planning), political parties in the parliament, and art and public organisations, thus facilitating critical junctures in the policy process. However, the policy window closed when the Senate exercised its decision-making power to adopt a different concept with financial backing from the federal government. Yet until then, there was no lack of political commitment; instead, there was a lack of experience in steering such a capital project and a lack of appropriate instruments to support the development. There was a notable willingness among stakeholders to learn, negotiate, and cooperate to find viable solutions to the site challenges. Despite differing views on the cultural activities at Alte Münze, there was a consensus that non-commercial cultural production should be supported. Thus, a supportive policy environment requires an openness to alternative solutions, transparent and structured stakeholder engagement, and the creation of necessary frameworks and instruments (e.g., financial and organisational) to facilitate and implement these new solutions.

Second, stakeholders preferred policy solutions that oppose neoliberal logic and support “collective and anti-speculative infrastructures that counter mainstream urban development” (van Heur et al., 2023, p. 1). There was consensus among stakeholders on reinvesting in long-term, publicly-owned workplace infrastructures and promoting collective forms of shared ownership (Borchi, 2018; Ross, 2022) and

public-civic cooperation (Russell et al., 2023). While the planning process was successfully leveraged to develop suitable governance and funding models, ensuring collective use and joint decision-making, the financial costs for renovation, operation, and maintenance eventually led the government to discontinue the stakeholder negotiations after the planning process.

Third, the collectively organised artists (AG Alte Münze, IG Jazz) have been vocal stakeholders who have contributed ideas and knowledge to the agenda-setting process. In contrast, the lack of collective organisation among the CCI actors resulted in weak representation. A prior process of collective empowerment and political mobilisation among artists enabled them to become potent policy entrepreneurs equipped with knowledge, expertise, and political connections to advocate specific policy solutions and to form robust alliances to mobilise support for their interests and increase their bargaining power (Landau, 2019). Their commitment stresses that “artists can have a more lasting (both temporally and spatially) strategic place-making role to play within urban development processes in post-industrial cities” (Bain, 2018, p. 864). Nevertheless, the negotiation process also underlines the deep-seated policy conflicts in Berlin’s cultural politics (Landau, 2019, 2021), which evolve around the meanings and values attached to the role of art and culture, the material needs of artists, and suitable policy support. The negotiations were not just about (work)space as a scarce resource but also about artistic hierarchies (who is entitled to such prime inner-city locations and why?), cultural needs in cities (what type of cultural activities should receive support?), and the role of common goods in the city.

8. Conclusion: A New Productive Turn for Cultural Clusters at Industrial Heritage Sites?

This article has analysed the multi-stakeholder negotiations surrounding Alte Münze, a publicly owned former mint in central Berlin, and the efforts to secure the site for cultural workspaces under public ownership. Berlin’s surplus of disused industrial heritage sites has offered affordable and suitable workspaces for artists and cultural workers for decades. However, many of these sites have been lost to competing land uses, posing a significant threat to the city’s cultural ecosystem and creating a need for new long-term public policy solutions.

The case of Alte Münze sits at the intersection of two supportive policy shifts: an ambitious artists’ workspace program introduced in 2016 and new land-use policies that have reshaped Berlin’s use and sale of public properties since 2010. Despite its unique context, the negotiations and public planning process mark an initial effort to enhance artists’ spatial and material conditions, countering the market-driven and often marginalising logic associated with investor-led developments of cultural clusters at industrial sites (Mathews, 2014; Pollio et al., 2021). In contrast, Alte Münze was already under public ownership, and the project involved a variety of potential users in a participatory planning process, resulting in a novel mixed-use concept with sustainable funding and a collaborative governance structure with joint decision-making that could inform a new approach to maintaining cultural workspaces. While this case had the potential to create an “alternative urban space” (Fisker et al., 2019) and manifest the new cultural infrastructure agenda with a highly symbolic project, shifting the focus from temporary to permanent solutions at industrial heritage sites (Boswinkel & van Meerkerk, 2023), this potential was interrupted when the new conservative government withdrew support and, eventually, suggested a commercial events-based use.

While the methodological approach is limited and needs to be substantiated with more qualitative data to explore motives and meaning-making among the diverse stakeholders in future research, documents

provided a rich data set to trace the negotiations and agenda setting and to identify both supportive conditions and challenges. The recent political shift underlines the crucial role of supportive policies and political commitment in providing the necessary instruments and resources to facilitate secure, affordable, and long-term workspaces for artists and cultural workers in cities. There is a need to create supportive regulations at the intersection of cultural policy and urban planning to safeguard such spaces and to facilitate collaborative planning approaches with artists and civil society stakeholders, as well as suitable governance structures with joint decision-making (Borchi, 2018; Borén & Young, 2017; Cossu, 2022; Russell et al., 2023) to overcome the uncertainty of many temporary bottom-up cultural clusters (Boswinkel & van Meerkerk, 2023). The artists' collective and engagement showed their willingness to commit to developing and managing the site to maintain it as a public property for non-commercial cultural uses.

In conclusion, given the size and location of the site, the case exemplifies that cultural clusters can be more than “liminal spaces of the post-industrial city in the margins of both, the built environment and the social imaginary” (Gainza, 2018, p. 794) if an enabling and supportive policy environment exists. The negotiations provided a rich conceptual space to rethink the development trajectories of industrial heritage sites as cultural clusters and contemporary workspace typologies for cultural production. While the case discussed here focuses on cultural workspace provision at a publicly-owned industrial heritage site, the research has broader implications for sustaining workspaces for small manufacturers facing similar spatial struggles and displacements under current urban development dynamics (Ferm et al., 2021; Martin & Grodach, 2023).

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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