

Co-Producing Urban Futures in Berlin: Temporary Urban Practices in Refugees' Space Production

Qusay Amer  and Juliana Canedo 

Habitat Unit, TU Berlin, Germany

Correspondence: Qusay Amer (amer@tu-berlin.de)

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Abstract

The challenge of refugee settlement in urban areas is a pressing issue globally. While Germany hosts the third-largest refugee population worldwide, around 33,530 refugees live in state-owned accommodation in Berlin. In this context, various institutional bodies have emerged to address the settlement of refugees and their broader integration into urban neighbourhoods, including initiatives that focus on the development of temporary activities in public spaces. Focusing on one such initiative in Berlin—BENN (Berlin Develops New Neighbourhoods)—this article builds on collaborative knowledge production involving researchers, students, and refugees to critically reflect and examine the potential and limitations of state-led efforts to co-produce alternative urban futures. By critically engaging with the literature on tactical urbanism, we argue that these initiatives can be understood as a form of urbanism that has the potential to produce socio-spatial transformations beyond the scope of the proposed activities. Through engaging with different design vocabularies, methods, and temporalities, the research seeks to demonstrate alternatives for collectively producing knowledge and spaces that contribute to more inclusive urban environments. Ultimately, the article aims to enrich ongoing debates on urban transformation and refugee integration, highlighting the dynamic interplay between institutional actors, communities, and academia.

Keywords

BENN; Berlin; insurgent urbanism; refugees; tactical urbanism; urban planning

1. Introduction

The challenge of refugee settlement has become an increasingly urgent global issue due to the rapid rise in displaced populations. While policy frameworks often address refugees as a temporary population, this perception significantly shapes how refugee spaces—predominantly located in urban areas (UNHCR, 2023)—are designed, often emphasising containment over inclusion. Within this context, political negotiation and informal practices can be understood through refugees' agency, as tactics deployed to overcome barriers produced by policies that frame them as temporary residents.

The notion of temporariness, and its implications for everyday life, has been widely contested. Agier (2011) argues that the condition of waiting experienced by refugees produces an “endless present,” suspending them in liminal spaces and undermining both autonomy and the capacity to imagine the future. However, refugees are not passive subjects; they actively engage in informal practices that reconfigure their relationship to time and space, navigating and negotiating restrictive structures (Dalal, 2022; Steigemann & Misselwitz, 2020). These acts, often unnoticed by formal systems, constitute resilience, resistance, and adaptation, revealing a more complex geography of migration. Refugees' practices can be interpreted as expressions of spatial and temporal agency (Ramachandran & Vathi, 2022), suggesting agency emerges not only from formal governance but also from the micro-politics of space and temporal strategies to reclaim control over their lives. The intersection of temporal uncertainty and spatial negotiation shows displacement as a deeply situated, dynamic process of making place and time meaningful within constraints.

According to the UNHCR (2025), Germany is the country with the third-largest number of refugees in the world. The most significant recent influx occurred between 2015 and 2016, when approximately 890,000 asylum applications were registered (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2015). This influx prompted shifts in governance frameworks and institutional structures, particularly in Berlin. In response, various institutional initiatives were established to address refugee settlement and integration within urban neighbourhoods, including BENN – Berlin Entwickelt Neue Nachbarschaften (Berlin Develops New Neighbourhoods), a program that was implemented in 26 different areas of the city, each one with its specific office and team. Funded by the Senate Department for Urban Development, Building and Housing (SenStadtB), BENN aims to strengthen neighbourhoods where refugees reside by fostering social cohesion through four key areas: (a) encounter and active cooperation, (b) empowerment and participation, (c) communication and dialogue, and (d) networking and neighbourhood development (BENN Marzahn-Süd, 2025).

The latter area focuses on the development of temporary activities in public space. As identified through our interviews with BENN team members, accommodation staff, district officials, and representatives of SenStadtB, the programme emerged in 2016 when the Berlin Senate sought to build on the experience of neighbourhood management to support refugee integration. BENN was conceived as a socio-spatial intervention at the neighbourhood scale, embedded within the Senate's broader integration master plan, which coordinated efforts across multiple administrative departments.

This article focuses on the interrelations between migration governance, refugee agency, and urban development emerging from collaborative research with BENN. It aims to identify strategies for urban future-making in the context of the ongoing polycrisis, while contributing to the development of alternative planning vocabularies and methodologies that prioritise collaborative processes over predefined outcomes.

The research draws on close collaboration with refugee groups from diverse backgrounds, as well as an examination of projects developed—particularly since 2015—within the framework of migration governance. The central research question is: What is the potential of temporary socio-spatial interventions, implemented by localised, state-led initiatives in collaboration with academic actors, to mobilise refugee agency in the co-production of alternative, flexible, and more inclusive urban futures?

To address this question, the article engages critically with literature on tactical and insurgent urbanism, examining both the potential and the limitations of state-led approaches to co-producing urban futures in collaboration with civil society, academic institutions, and local initiatives. The analysis draws on two years of collaborative research with one of the offices of BENN located Marzahn-Süd, in the eastern part of Berlin, and refugee communities in their neighbourhood. This work involved mapping pathways for the collective production of knowledge and space through experimental design vocabularies and methods.

The article approaches BENN Marzahn-Süd's practices from a spatial perspective, arguing that initiatives embedded within institutional frameworks, yet closely connected to local refugee and migrant communities, can mediate between situated needs and broader urban planning agendas. Collaboration with researchers and students in architecture and urban studies enabled the development and testing of methodologies and pedagogical approaches aimed at generating longer-term impacts through small-scale, temporary interventions.

2. Between Temporary Actions and Suspended Lives

Agier argued that displacement produces a temporal condition of suspension in addition to spatial marginalisation. He writes:

The refugee camps are always hybrid organisms, not reproducing any socio-spatial form that already exists; they are new experiences for the locality in which they are established, if only for the permanent paradox that their existence expresses, between an indefinite temporality and a space that is transformed because its occupants necessarily appropriate it in order to be able to live in it. (Agier, 2011, p. 53)

The in-between time, as Agier described it, is a condition in which refugees reside in an ambiguous present that is perpetually extended and in which they are neither fully temporary nor fully settled. Their lives and routines are structured around waiting, uncertainty, and restricted mobility—the result of a temporal suspension frequently reinforced by humanitarian and bureaucratic policies. Spaces of refuge (e.g., camps or refugee neighbourhoods) become places where new identities, solidarities, and forms of politics can emerge. The temporality of these spaces is thus processual: these spaces are not fixed but in flux, where people improvise, contest, and create futures (Agier et al., 2002, 2010, 2011; Dalal, 2022). Within these conditions of uncertainty, new temporal practices of space emerge in many forms, such as resistance, adaptation, and conflictual practices. According to Steigemann and Misselwitz (2020, p. 646), these spatial practices:

Often result in such permanently temporal grey spaces, through the ongoing oppression by the state agencies and their official architectures of asylum and regulation regime, but [the authors] also saw

how refugees' agency is exercised 'descending into the ordinary and reclaiming liveable spaces' (Sanyal, 2014, p. 569).

The connection between the temporal conditions of people—defined by waiting and uncertainty—and their temporal practices allows us to move beyond this binary of permanence and temporariness, recognising their complex entanglement. We emphasise that these practices are not simplistic reactions to precarity, but rather interventions that establish futures within constrained contexts.

Temporary uses of space can be understood as one manifestation of tactical urbanism, a set of low-cost, small-scale, and non-permanent interventions that seek to test alternative spatial arrangements and provoke change in the built environment (Lydon & Garcia, 2015). Tactical urbanism operates through experimentation, informality, and short timeframes, allowing actors to explore possibilities that fall outside formal planning instruments. This implies a space for experimenting and for pursuing solutions not addressed in master plans. Bråten (2025) further discussed the concept of “meanwhile use” (*Zwischennutzungen*), where temporary occupation of vacant sites functions as a testing ground for future development while also generating cultural visibility and economic interest, for which Berlin is well known, an example where temporary uses of space are employed to attract capital investment in under-used sites (Bråten, 2025, p. 13). In this sense, tactical urbanism is positioned strategically within development processes, not primarily to enable inclusion, but rather as a mechanism that can prefigure, accelerate, or legitimise longer-term urban transformation and is often aligned with market-oriented objectives.

On the one hand, tactical urbanism can be understood as part of an effort to operationalise the notion of the open city (Abou Jaoude et al., 2024). On the other hand, critical engagements with tactical urbanism suggest that when such practices reconfigure, reappropriate, and temporarily revitalise space in ways that align with dominant planning or development strategies, they are absorbed into those strategies and therefore lose their tactical character (Mould, 2014, p. 533). In this regard, Seldin et al. (2020, p. 772) argue that temporary interventions should be considered genuinely “tactical” only when they are bottom-up and support collective struggles for access to basic rights, enacted through the insurgent practices described by Miraftab (2009). Correspondingly, in cities shaped by strongly neoliberal urban development agendas, such practices are often co-opted by dominant development logics. As a result, creative urban interventions are frequently absorbed into processes of urban capitalism, where they function less as tools of transformation and more as new modes of capitalist control (Mould, 2014, p. 529).

By linking tactical urbanism with the temporality of refugee spaces and positioning time as a central analytical category, this perspective exposes the embedded power relations that determine what is defined as temporary, by whom, and for how long. Refugee accommodations function as instruments for reshaping the expectations, wishes, and desires of asylum seekers according to the host country's regulatory frameworks and perceptions of new arrivals. This phase constitutes a latent period in which asylum seekers and undocumented migrants are monitored, categorised, and familiarised with policing and administrative practices that will shape their lives as refugees within the host society (Agier, 2011).

In our research, we documented the efforts of BENN in Marzahn-Süd, Berlin, to implement temporary, low-cost interventions aimed at enhancing public spaces, encouraging community engagement, and facilitating social interaction. Although not explicitly framed as such, we argue that BENN's actions can be

understood as forms of tactical urbanism, operating through the activation of social networks and the empowerment of refugees by promoting temporary spatial interventions. However, drawing on critiques that highlight how tactical urbanism is not inherently transformative and may risk reproducing hegemonic and oppressive power structures, we propose moving beyond temporary spatial interventions alone. Instead, we suggest developing new methods that combine action, teaching, and research in order to foster alternative and counter-hegemonic ways of inhabiting and producing space.

Building on the work of scholars such as Miraftab (2009) and Roy (2011), Canedo and Andrade (2024) propose a discussion of insurgent urbanism as a way of shifting hegemonic spatial knowledge structures and repositioning the local knowledge of marginalised communities at the centre of the production of space. Within this framework, co-production is understood as an experimental field in which alternative ways of living are investigated, analysed, and tested in practice, enabling the collective imagination of futures grounded in the perspectives of historically invisibilised voices. Canedo and Andrade (2024) define insurgent urbanism as an approach that understands planning and design as forms of knowledge production emerging from lived experience and validated through practice. This dialectical process, which begins and ends with action, as described by Friedmann (1987), requires continuous critical reflection and transformation in the tactics and subsequent actions of all actors involved.

Canedo and Andrade (2024) proposed, for the understanding of an insurgent urbanism, three key learning aspects for collaborative activities between city-building professionals and communities that could lead to potential forms of insurgent urbanism: (a) experiments using different knowledge and technologies, (b) the approximation of design and building through a learning-by-doing process, and (c) the development of mutual learning environments. The authors have often pointed out that these aspects provide a critical perspective on the hegemonic hierarchies of knowledge that validate certain types and formats of knowledge while disregarding others (Andrade & Canedo, 2019; Friedmann, 1987; Illich, 1973). Moreover, they have highlighted the production of imaginative futures (Miraftab, 2009) by giving space for experimentation with different knowledge and technologies. These mutual learning environments have been an attempt to balance or critically address the existing power structures and interests when working with different groups of actors and are understood as having the potential for contesting dominant spatial logics and enabling more transformative forms of urban agency (Canedo & Andrade, 2024).

In this context, this article draws on empirical work involving researchers, students, BENN Marzahn-Süd, and refugees living in state-run accommodation in Marzahn-Süd to explore the potential interconnections between temporality and insurgency. While tactical urbanism highlights small-scale actions aim at empowering people and transforming spaces, as previously discussed, insurgent urbanism emphasises the capacity of marginalised groups to actively shape their environments and challenge hegemonic power structures (Canedo, 2025; Canedo & Andrade, 2024). This concept is grounded in the understanding that people have the ability to creatively transform and critically reflect on their own spaces, and that their knowledge should be integrated into planning and design processes (Canedo, 2025). In the following sections, we apply these perspectives to the collaborative work developed between BENN, refugees, students, and academics, highlighting the crucial role of insurgent urbanism in the collective transformation of urban futures.

3. The BENN Programme and the Governance of Refugee Integration in Berlin

Throughout the last decade, Berlin has received a large number of refugees, resulting in increased pressure on existing infrastructure. According to the State Office for Refugee Affairs, around 41,369 refugees have been housed, with 33,530 living in state-managed accommodation distributed across the city (State Office for Refugee Affairs, 2025). Among the strategies developed by the state to address these challenges is BENN, established in 2018 as part of the Strategies and Overall Concept for the Integration and Participation of Refugees, initiated by the Senate Department for Participation, Integration, and Migration (2025). The programme aims to strengthen neighbourhoods hosting refugees by promoting integration between refugees and their neighbours. Phase one of BENN ran from 2017 to 2021 in 20 areas of the city, while phase two (2022–2028) operates in 23 areas, with each office managed by a designated operator (SenStadtB, 2025).

The location of BENN offices is determined by districts that host large refugee accommodation sites and are considered to lack adequate infrastructure. As stated in the programme description:

In urban areas that do not yet have the necessary infrastructure, meeting places must be developed and expanded as a matter of priority. Funding through the urban development programmes BENN (Berlin Develops New Neighbourhoods) and FEIN (Volunteering in Neighbourhoods) of the Senate Department for Urban Development, Building and Housing (SenStadtB) will be examined on a location-specific basis. (SenStadtB, 2025)

BENN was funded through the SenStadtB programme Social Infrastructure, which provided construction funds accessible across Berlin. In Marzahn-Süd, where our research took place, the BENN team—according to our interview partners from the Marzahn district office—is connected to the Urban Development Office. In many other districts, however, the coordination team is linked to the Organisational Unit for Social Space-Oriented Planning Coordination (Organisationseinheit Sozialraumorientierte Planungskoordination) or directly to the Integration Office.

As a result, approaches to coordination and collaboration with other Senate offices vary, depending on the district in which each BENN office is based. Coordination took place through district-level steering committees comprising representatives from the district office, the Senate Administration for Urban Development, and the BENN team. These committees discussed local needs and oversaw the implementation of construction measures.

In her study on post-migrant spatial justice using BENN as a case study, Jahre (2021) emphasised that BENN adopted many of the structures established in Berlin's Neighbourhood Management Programme (Quartiersmanagement), including local teams, steering groups, and participatory decision-making processes for residents. According to Jahre, despite various critiques, the programme demonstrated a degree of progressive emancipation from federal policy by allocating state funding to address spatial injustices in refugee accommodation and to foster the participation of refugees, local residents, and civil society actors.

Berlin, as a city-state, combines the responsibilities of the state and local authorities and offers both initial reception centres and long-term accommodation. Migration governance is structured between the federal

government, which controls the asylum procedure and distribution at the national level, the federal states, which are responsible for distribution at the district level—as shown in Figure 1—as well as the standards and funding of accommodation, and the municipalities, which implement the reception policy.

The researched neighbourhood is located within the district of Marzahn-Hellersdorf, situated in the eastern part of Berlin and is known for its post-war socialist architecture, Plattenbau (large-panel-system buildings), as part of the East German Housing Programme. The urban development was influenced by the Soviet concept of the Mikroraiion, the modern high-rise apartment towers inspired by Le Corbusier’s International Congresses of Modern Architecture and new urbanist ideas (Sammartino, 2018).

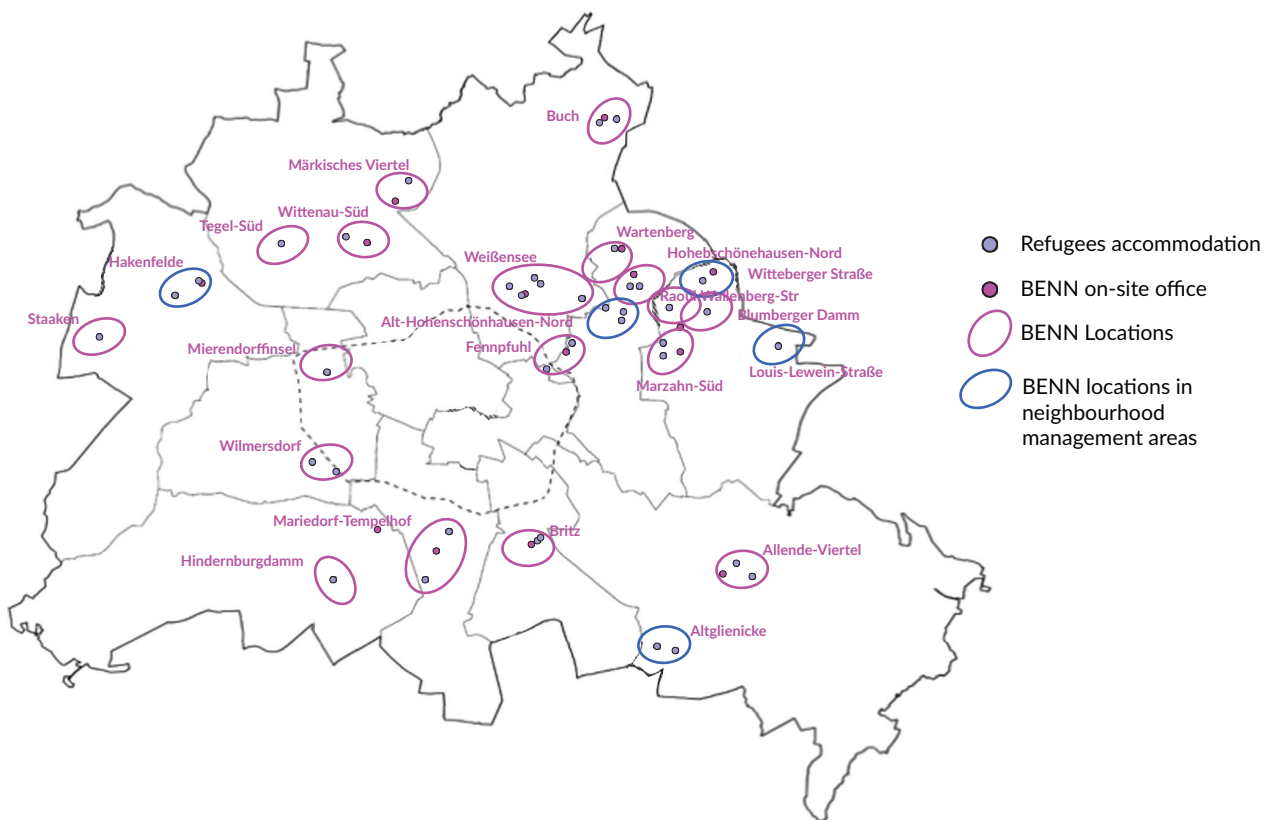


Figure 1. Locations of refugee accommodations and BENN locations in Berlin. Source: Adapted from State Office for Refugee Affairs (2025).

After unification, the district underwent many changes. The most significant of these resulted from the privatisation of the estates and their integration into the open housing market, which led to an increase in rents and pushed residents to move away for socio-economic reasons. As a result, many dwellings became vacant and infrastructure was deconstructed (Trilling, 2014). In the late 1990s, housing vacancy rates reached record levels. Between 1993 and 2003, nearly 70% of dwellings were refurbished, and by 2010, around 300,000 dwellings had been demolished.

Since 2015, structural redensification in Marzahn has caused significant population growth, and compared to other Berlin districts, it has more potential development areas (District Office of Marzahn-Hellersdorf, 2017). The district previously had a relatively low proportion of inhabitants with a migration background compared to other Berlin districts; however, this has changed in recent years. In 2024, there were a total

of 35,400 refugees in Berlin shelters, 4,233 of whom were in Marzahn-Hellersdorf—11.96% of the Berlin total. This is a relatively high percentage compared to other Berlin districts, with only Pankow and Treptow-Köpenick having higher proportions.

BENN operates through the development of temporary activities, such as festivals, language cafés, organised tours, gardening actions, and film exhibitions, among others. The activities aim to create networks and connections between refugees and neighbours and support refugees in their daily needs, ultimately to understand the main demands and wishes of the residents of the neighbourhood. These demands are collected through various means, then systematised by BENN and presented to different state structures. BENN itself does not have the power to develop policies or specific actions according to residents' needs but acts as a mediator between them and over-bureaucratic state structures.

This article is based on the research we have been conducting over the past two years, as well as some actions that were developed through the collaboration between BENN Marzahn-Süd and students and researchers from TU Berlin during a design studio in 2024. The next sections aim to describe those actions and their impact by dialoguing with literature on temporary spatial interventions and the temporality of living of refugees in Berlin.

4. Collaborative Research as a Methodological Tool to Collectively Build Urban Futures

Our collaboration with BENN combined research, teaching, and outreach activities to develop a dialogue between BENN's goals and our research objectives. Together, we planned a series of neighbourhood interactions, including refugees living in two accommodation sites in BENN Marzahn-Süd (Figure 2). Students mapped the different actors, clustered by activities rather than influence, with the shared accommodation as a central reference point (Figure 3), distinguishing decision-makers, support providers, and sources of indirect influence. The interactions aimed to deepen understanding of the neighbourhood from the refugees' perspective. BENN functioned as a meeting point, offering space, organisation, and orientation for activities such as food and cooking festivals, open-air cinemas, language cafés, bazaars, and urban gardening. This collaboration allowed researchers, lecturers, and students to engage with complex social issues while enabling BENN to expand its scope. The project's success also relied on personal connections with the BENN team, particularly Marzahn-Süd, which was open to experimenting with collaborative tools to explore integration and liveability.

Besides the use of qualitative research methods (interviews, focus groups, case studies, visual and participatory methods, narrative and biographical methods, etc.), the design studios experimented with a series of collaborative methods embedded in the discussion of insurgent urbanism, toward a co-produced space (Canedo, 2025). Insurgent practices become an alternative epistemological lens that challenges hegemonic hierarchies and emphasises the historically embedded character of urban knowledge through decolonial perspectives.

Using this methodological framework, we—as researchers and students from architecture, urban planning, and urban design—developed and tested collaborative methods for mapping, design, and building. This was applied with different groups of refugees living in two shelters in Marzahn-Süd over four academic semesters. In cooperation with BENN Marzahn-Süd and the shelter administrations, we conducted a series of activities



Figure 2. View of refugee accommodation in Marzahn-Süd.

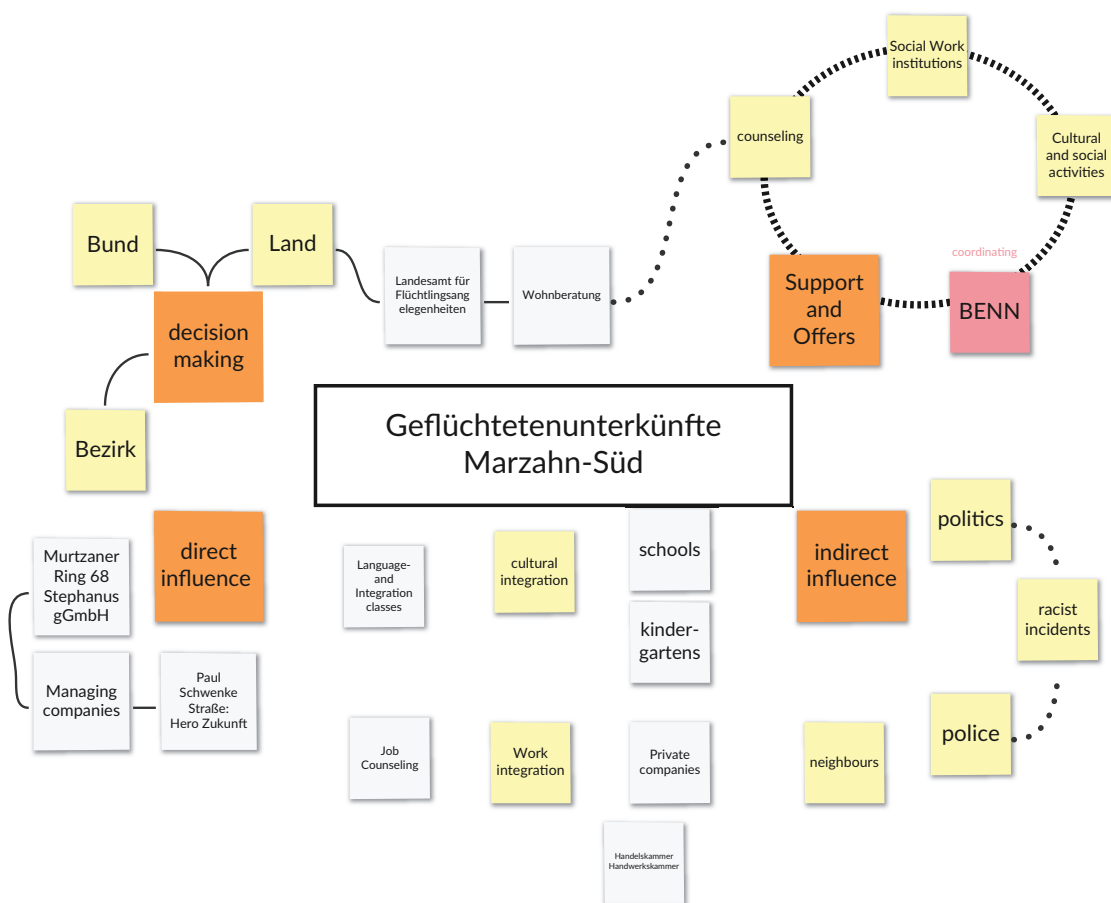


Figure 3. General overview of the actors around the shared accommodations in Marzahn-Süd.

aimed at engaging, consolidating, and co-designing with various refugee groups (men, women, children, and youths). For this research, we focused on the voices of refugees living in the accommodations and did not include those of neighbourhood residents, as our approach aimed to address the group affected by transitory living spaces and understand how BENN's actions in public space particularly impacted them.

The activities and workshops unfolded in different phases, allowing for adjustment, adaptation, and reflection after each event, rather than leading to a fixed final product. Throughout the process, we questioned the role of architects and urban planners in vulnerable contexts. Our focus lay less on tangible outputs than on the process itself, which we understood as a form of design. The main goal was to deconstruct hegemonic ideas embedded in planning and design practices and to foster an environment of mutual learning—and, most importantly, unlearning.

Through a set of collaborative methods and tools for mapping and design, participants were encouraged to develop a critical understanding of the role of architects and urbanists, especially in marginalised contexts and communities. The students had the opportunity to engage with a range of actors and to develop activities together with refugees. Furthermore, they reflected on their professional formation and everyday practices—both within the university and in their current work in architectural offices. The aim was not to replicate BENN's work, but rather to expand the horizon of possibilities for engagement between refugees and local residents through the testing of innovative and creative tools. In other words, we intended to shift the perspective toward more inclusive practices within our field, where marginalised groups are often disregarded in planning and design. The tools ranged from the use of artefacts and games to artistic explorations and collective mapping strategies.

In our understanding, collaborative design leads to outcomes that prioritise processes over products. Fostering a shared vision and establishing new social bonds—or strengthening existing ones—are integral parts of these outcomes. More than learning experiences, we, as a collective, underwent lived processes of unlearning, challenging our assumptions and knowledge while seeking to create dialogue among different forms of knowing and perspectives. As the students emphasised in the final report of one of our design studios: “No design authority; different forms of aesthetics; questioning our role as planners.” Another student, reflecting on her personal experience, noted: “We are not so different, and maybe if we can dig deep into our lives, we will find that we share similar stories...stories that can help us build a cohesive neighbourhood.” A third student commented on expectations and project management: “By scaling down expectations and remaining open to the process and outcomes, we avoid imposing our own ideas and instead gain unexpected, valuable results.”

Similarly, we were challenged to understand ourselves as actors within the process of spatial design and development, which provided us with an opportunity for critical reflection on our own role. This, in turn, helped us recognise the factors affecting the community we were working with and to bring marginalised and silenced voices into the discussion. As both instructors and researchers, we facilitated the workshop sessions with the students, who were responsible for organising the workshops themselves, thereby creating a space where participants could critically engage with the subject matter.

This type of work comes with particularly challenging ethical considerations. In order to address this, we prepared students through a set of inputs by experts on ethical work with marginalised communities and

also discussed together literature on the topic, developing our own set of ethical principles. Among those, we highlight: (1) transparency in the communication of the goals and scope of the activities with the participants; (2) assuring anonymity of the participants, also in the way the pictures were taken and treated by the students; (3) voluntary participation based on the assumption of all participants' right to opt out at any moment; and (4) constantly reflecting on power unbalances and "parasitical relationship" between researcher and researched (Clark-Kazak, 2021; Gaete Cruz et al., 2022; Kelly, 2019). Ethical concerns and issues were also constantly debated throughout the class, from both the perspective of the participants and the students on some occasions, and they were faced with challenging situations that they were not always prepared to deal with. We consider these challenges and ethical considerations also part of the process of interacting with local communities, especially those affected by trauma, and needs to be constantly addressed and further developed according to each context, instead of being understood as a fixed set of guidelines.

Furthermore, we took part in the data generation process by engaging in collaborative activities, discussions, and written reflections. In terms of research methods, the student groups employed a combination of surveys, mapping, and collective drawing. The use of multiple methods proved more effective than relying on surveys or mapping alone. Likewise, combining individual and group work was found to be particularly productive in generating informed results that respected each participant's comfort level. The collected data included recorded interviews, drawings and maps done collectively with the refugees, personal diaries of the students, and photographic material. These data were shared among all students and researchers and later compiled into an eBook that also included the findings and reflections of the involved groups. These findings were later incorporated into our own research, where we intentionally moved beyond survey-based approaches to include more active and diverse activities that encouraged participants to feel comfortable and willing to take part.

To conclude this section, we refer to the work of several scholars (Canedo, 2025; Canedo & Andrade, 2024; de Souza, 2007; Escobar, 2018; Miraftab, 2009, 2017) to define key criteria for insurgent practices, as follows:

1. Autonomous: Linked to decentralised, self-managed, and horizontal forms of power; they are also understood as anti-capitalist in their attempt to reclaim social life from state control.
2. Counter- or anti-hegemonic: Challenges dominant power structures beyond state control and is often rooted in marginalised or oppressed communities, led by grassroots actors.
3. Transgressive and relational: Builds alliances across struggles and promotes participatory democracy, requiring the invention or reclamation of spaces beyond those sanctioned by authorities.
4. Imaginative and transformative: Adaptable to shifting sites of power; involves defending, transforming, or inventing new practices to envision alternative futures and spatial justice.

By focusing on refugees' perceptions of integration in Berlin and working in close collaboration with local actors and institutions, the project aimed to promote a transdisciplinary debate. It encouraged students to reflect on the integrative and co-productive roles of city-building professionals by developing scenarios for transforming the current situation. The project addressed issues such as spatial conflicts and negotiation, insurgent planning and design, the right to the city, and the tension between housing and shelter—examined through the lenses of institutional barriers, architectural and infrastructural elements, and social-spatial dynamics. The students developed their work in three phases, described in the following subsections.

4.1. Preparation Phase and Collaborative Methods

In this phase, the students experimented with a variety of collaborative methods and tools for approximation with the local community. The goal of those activities was to introduce ourselves to the residents and to test what would and would not work. This intensive interaction generated a process filled with frustration, expectations, emotions, new ideas, learning, and unlearning for everyone involved.

Depending on the context, the collaborative methods varied to serve the specific purpose of each workshop. These included the imaginary map, in which participants positioned themselves in relation to others; thematic round-tables, where a topic of interest was proposed and the group was encouraged to lead the discussion; walk interviews with individuals or groups along their favourite paths while taking field notes; presentations with objects and/or photographs, through which participants explained their personal connections to them; initiating games that integrated spatial aspects of the areas where participants lived; and the organising of visits (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Workshops with refugees at the accommodation in Marzahn-Süd.

4.2. Design Phase

The students conducted a variety of collaborative actions with different groups of refugees, including men, children, women, and youths. Whenever possible, activities were co-designed with the participants and were continuously re-evaluated and refined by the students. The activities were designed to exchange social-spatial knowledge with the different groups and to build trust, extending beyond the purely design-oriented dimension. During this period, students co-developed games, explored the neighbourhood through the perspectives of children and youths, documented Berlin using photography as a design tool, co-designed a bazaar with women (see Figure 5), and developed interview tools such as the “dream journey.” The dream journey is a method consisting of one-to-one interviews, where the interviewer asks the person

to close her eyes and imagine her favourite place. The interviewer would then ask the woman to describe what she saw and how she felt, and, through guiding questions, would create visualisations of this ideal space. This helped to understand participants' memories and imaginations of space, among other activities.

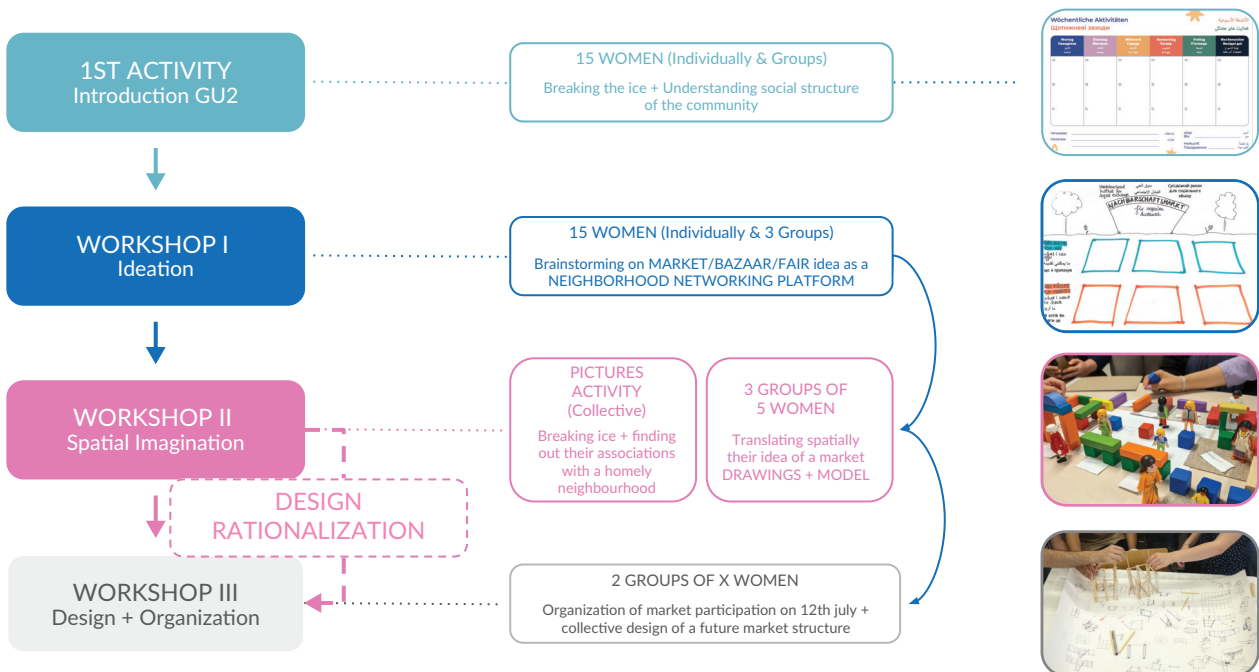


Figure 5. Participatory process for the co-design of a bazaar. Note: GU2 = Gemeinschaftsunterkunft für Geflüchtete (Shared accommodation for refugees).

4.3. Building Phase

Rather than focusing on products or outcomes, we aimed to explore the process and experiment with different formats for engaging and interacting with society. Neither the sequence nor the manner of implementing the proposed methods is ever fixed. In each design studio, students were able to adapt and develop new tools within these methods. While the main structure and objectives could often be predetermined, the building phase functioned as a continuation of the design phase, during which the validation of ideas and concepts with the involved actors persisted.

In this sense, action-based processes are crucial for the development of insurgent urbanism. While acknowledging the particularities and specificities of the local context, these processes create opportunities to challenge hegemonic discourses and practices. Beyond promoting equitable and inclusive planning and design strategies, insurgent urbanism, as we understand it, seeks to reflect on and experiment with alternative ways of engaging with the built environment.

5. Potentials and Limitations of State-Led Efforts in Co-Producing Alternative Urban Futures

As argued by Agier (2011), the temporality imposed on refugees generates a condition of paralysis, in which their lives appear to be on hold. Strategies aimed at the long term often fail to effectively enhance their sense

of belonging or the quality of daily life, particularly in over-bureaucratized contexts such as Berlin (Kreichauf, 2018; Steigemann & Misselwitz, 2020). We contend that BENN's temporary interventions in public space influence the perceptions and lived experiences of refugees in the Marzahn neighbourhood. Although BENN's primary objective is not to develop temporary urbanism, this article argues that the small-scale and short-term actions implemented by BENN have the potential to foster socio-spatial transformations in the experiences of refugees living in Berlin. As Jahre (2021) notes:

The BENN programme is inherently spatial by considering the following: Firstly, it is unique to the city and state of Berlin; secondly, it works with a conception of the local as neighbourhood and even carries neighbourhood in its name; and thirdly, the programme is tied to the need [for the] existence of a refugee shelter.

Our studies suggest that collaboration between state-led actors and academics—particularly researchers and students in architecture and urbanism—can create alternative ways of addressing both the practical and symbolic dimensions of refugees' everyday lives. Information gathered through interviews with representatives of BENN Marzahn-Süd highlighted the importance of community-oriented and bottom-up approaches that focus on everyday social interaction rather than formal institutional management. Interviewees explained that their work prioritises understanding residents' needs and fostering opportunities for neighbours to meet, interact, and become familiar with their local environment. In contrast to more official neighbourhood management structures, these initiatives were described as more flexible, creative, and grounded in community participation.

One example discussed in the interviews was UnbezahlBar, a project established three years ago that functions both as a redistribution initiative and as a social meeting point. Residents are encouraged to donate items they no longer need, which others can then take free of charge. Beyond material exchange, the project also serves as a space for social connection and offers free support and advice on social issues. The initiative is jointly supported by several organisations, including Volkssolidarität e.V., the German Red Cross Berlin Nord-Ost e.V., BENN Marzahn-Süd, and BENN Blumberger Damm. As described by interview participants, the project demonstrates how solidarity and mutual assistance can be actively cultivated at the neighbourhood level.


The exchange between refugees—with their knowledge of the local context and perspectives—and students, bringing creativity and technical expertise, combined with the mediation and trust-building facilitated by BENN and the residents, proved capable of generating alternative ideas, ranging from small-scale interventions to broader proposals for the area.

During a design studio in the summer semester of 2024, students built upon previous research conducted in collaboration with BENN, to develop design proposals for the neighbourhood in engagement with three distinct groups—children, women, and youths—across two types of refugee accommodation in Marzahn-Süd. By cross-referencing these prior outcomes with the proposed urban interventions, the students evaluated how well community needs had been addressed. Based on this analysis, they refined their projects into more comprehensive proposals that responded to a broader range of community needs.


One of the groups of students focused specifically on the needs of migrant women, identifying that the primary challenge was the women's disconnection from their neighbourhood. In collaboration with the participants,

the group developed a concept to create a tool for building social networks within the community, which resulted in the bazaar/pavilion (Figure 6)—a space intended for the exchange of goods, services, and practices rather than commercial activity. This initiative sparked a productive discussion about the types of spatialities that could emerge from such a structure, including features such as a gate or entrance, areas promoting privacy where women could gather away from public view, and spaces for children, acknowledging that caregiving responsibilities remain predominantly associated with women. Based on these findings and experiments, a manual for the bazaar was developed and handed over to BENN. As the student group noted:


If BENN in turn decides to fund the building of the pavilion, the women will have a tool to regain ownership of their neighbourhood. It will not just give them a platform to represent their skills individually or as a group, but also the opportunity to connect to the neighbourhood. It will be a social tool to connect to each other, a place that clearly belongs to them. BENN could use a wall of the pavilion as an information board for local businesses, so that there is information that would be useful for the women gathered comprehensively in one place. Equally, these amenities could be offered the opportunity to use the pavilion [by other groups of refugees] at a future bazaar.


translating ideas

embracing diversity

prioritising collaborative processes

valuing of meaningful social moments in process

Figure 6. Participatory process for the co-design of a bazaar.

Two additional student groups focused on children’s perspectives of their neighbourhood. Through walking tours with the children and a diverse range of playful activities, the students sought to understand and represent the neighbourhood from the children’s point of view—a perspective often overlooked in planning and design (Million & Heinrich, 2014, p. 335). This approach allowed them to examine the accessibility of basic urban infrastructure, as well as cultural and natural spaces that provide respite from the restrictive regulations shaping the daily experiences of refugee children. As illustrated in Figure 7, the children themselves mapped the area, identifying spaces according to their own perceptions.

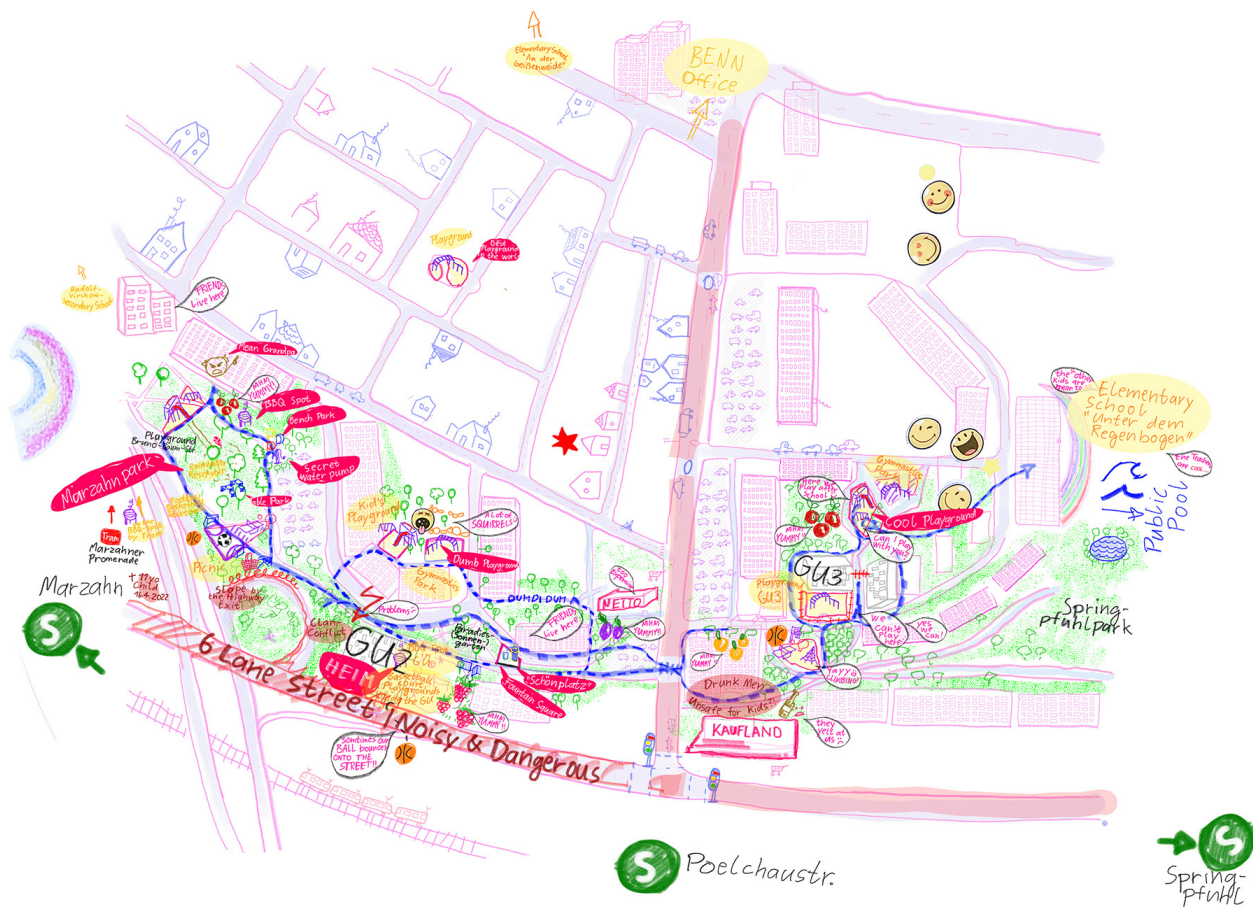


Figure 7. Mapping spatial findings with children living in the accommodation.

This spatial understanding led to several outcomes that were collectively discussed and developed with the children, including the mobile playground (Figure 8). The playground was designed to circumvent the regulations in the shared accommodation, which restrict children from having friends visit inside. It also provided a tool that allowed them to bring their toys into public spaces and meet their school friends outside the accommodation. The mobile playground also functioned as a playful element in its own right, as the children’s imagination transformed it into a stage, a table tennis area, and other uses. Additionally, it enabled the children to explore ways to enhance their autonomy and engagement with the neighbourhood. The primary focus was on empowering children to influence their environment and build connections with the broader community.

BOLLERWAGEN OUTCOME

Kids identify with the Bollerwagen and recognise ownership...



Concept Workshops Findings Reflection



BUILD A PICNIC! WORKSHOP 2

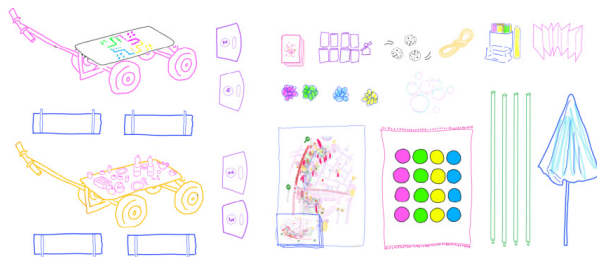
Methods:
Active Participation Project-Based Learning Problem-Solving



+ One-on-one conversations
Concept Workshops Findings Reflection

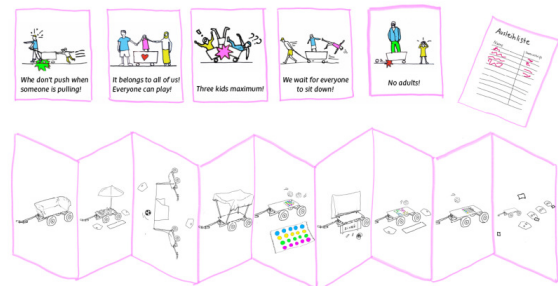
+ Hands-on implementation of kids' ideas on the Bollerwagen and see how it interacts with their surroundings

BOLLERWAGEN OUTCOME



Concept Workshops Findings Reflection

BOLLERWAGEN OUTCOME



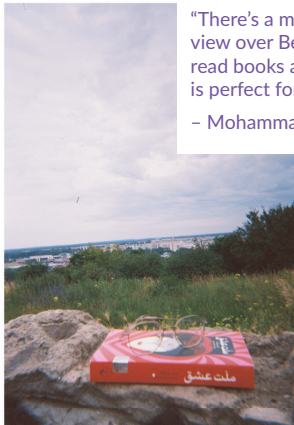
Concept Workshops Findings Reflection

Figure 8. Mobile playground workshop with children living in the accommodation.

Another group worked with youth, focusing on understanding their perspectives and challenges in navigating Berlin through the use of photography as a planning and design tool. The students described the act of capturing photographs as a brief, fleeting moment, which provides insights into the photographer's life perspective; these visual perspectives are unbound by language and can be understood by anyone. To gain an authentic understanding of the lives of refugees in Berlin, the group conducted several workshops with residents of the shelter on Paul Schwenk Straße. The students noted:

At the end of the workshops, everyone received a disposable camera to capture moments from their daily lives, which were later exhibited during the neighbourhood festival in the shelter. Our aim was to have a fluid and flexible process in place to answer a specific research question: How can photography be a tool for insurgent design?

Over the course of the semester, the students not only developed workshops with the refugees but also built relations and friendships, identifying shared interests and values. This trust-building process yielded deep insights into social-spatial practices and knowledge, connecting the everyday struggles of participants with strategies for coping with feelings of isolation, exclusion, and segregation. The photographs taken by the refugees, along with selected quotes from their conversations, were exhibited in the shelter on the final day of the studio (Figure 9).



"There's a mountain in Marzarhn with a good view over Berlin. I go there twice a week to read books and to enjoy privacy. This place is perfect for me - I don't need any more."

- Mohammad

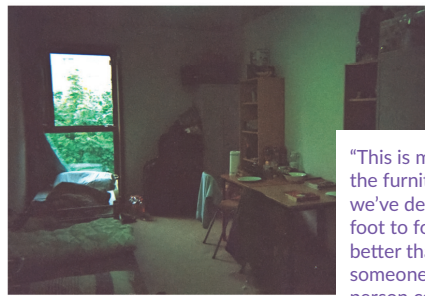


"We tend to forget just how epic our lives could be."

- Shabnam

"This is my German course and I'm learning B1 there. I go there every day and have made good friends like Igor. I speak a lot of German with him because in my previous class I didn't speak to anyone - I don't know why. I often can't find topics to talk about with people."

- Mohammad



"This is my room. We can arrange the furniture however we like we've decided to have the beds foot to foot. Living together is better than being alone, because if someone has a problem, the other person can help. It would be much more difficult on your own."

- Mohammad

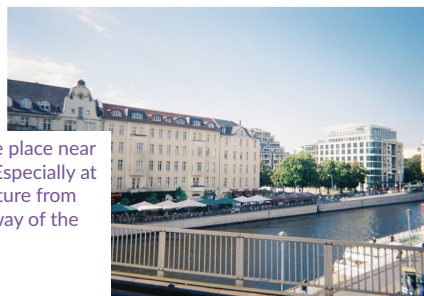


"Some musicians were singing together, everyone was in love with it. I wanted to take this moment in my memories. Like a ... I don't know how to say it ... A gathering moment? I like that."

- Naveed

"I take the train every time to meet my friends in Berlin. I found a nice spot in Berlin to chill together, near to the Spree and in front of the DDR museum. We go there every time."

- Usman



"This is my favourite place near to Friedrichstraße. Especially at night. I took the picture from the station, on my way of the german class."

- Shabnam



"The TV Tower. I love its unique and towering structure. Is it the tallest tower in Germany? I enjoy seeing it during the Light Festival; it looks like futuristic architecture."

- Naveed

Figure 9. Photographic collection created by refugees documenting everyday life and lived experiences.

6. Towards Insurgent Alternative Urban Futures

Circling back to the temporality of these contested spaces, the actions by state-led initiatives aim to address the issue of broader integration of refugees into urban neighbourhoods and appear to shift the focus toward more inclusive urban futures. As this article seeks to address these spatial practices through the lens of insurgent urbanism and decolonial methodologies, it situates collaborative design in between state-, civil society-, and academic actors and examines the related negotiations on hierarchies, authority, and agency.

The literature on tactical urbanism provided an access for identifying the actions undertaken by BENN and offered a theoretical background for interpreting their nature. By contrast, the co-production methods demonstrate how space can be reinterpreted and appropriated by participants. Within the dominant ways of planning knowledge, these perspectives emerged as epistemic intervention, through emphasising unlearning approaches, and transdisciplinary exchanges of knowledge that is created through interactions between refugees, students, and institutional actors, and presented refugee spaces as continuously co-constructed through social and spatial negotiations.

By bringing together insurgent urbanism with state-led efforts toward migration, this study contributes to the reconceptualisation of refugees' spaces as a relational and contested field. Our research, in line with Jahre (2021), has proven that the tactical approaches by BENN are a progressive emancipation from the federal policy. According to Jahre (2021, p. 87), "BENN allocates state funding to focus on problems related to spatial injustice of refugee shelters and it aims for the participation of inhabitants and [the establishment of] networks to achieve social cohesion." This article proposes a framework for understanding refugee spatial production through insurgent urbanism as a struggle over the conditions that enable alternative urban futures, inclusion, and agency, rather than a problem of design or management.

By centring the voices and actions of refugees, this research sought to critically reflect on top-down urban development processes while experimenting with alternative modes of inclusion that embrace a diversity of actors, practices, and forms of knowledge. Approaching this from the perspective of architecture and planning students, and in collaboration with local, state-led actors such as BENN, the project highlighted the need to further develop tools and methodologies capable of addressing the persistent challenges and limitations embedded in contemporary planning practice.

During the field work, we were able to document numerous challenges and limitations through collective reflections and discussion rounds. A recurring theme was the lack of adequate tools within our fields to initiate truly collaborative design processes. This shortcoming became evident in the struggle to identify suitable approaches for engaging the focus groups—particularly children—who tend to receive and communicate information in more abstract ways than adults. As architects and planners are traditionally trained to prioritise technical expertise and control outcomes, it proved challenging to step back, provide guidance, and offer incentives rather than predetermine results. Canedo (2025) notes that many practitioners consequently struggle to meaningfully incorporate diverse perspectives into their projects, lacking the skills required to facilitate open dialogue, listen actively, and adapt to the evolving needs of communities. Throughout this process, students emphasised the difficulty of avoiding the imposition of their own vision on the groups—a tendency deeply embedded in their academic training.

Furthermore, shifting the focus from end products to a process-oriented approach—and understanding design as a collective effort—proved essential for managing expectations and fostering transformative practices. This deeper understanding also revealed contradictions between practical research and the rigid frameworks of academia, particularly in relation to time and budget constraints that hindered the building of trust within the research context.

Communication barriers—including language differences and diverse communication styles—posed additional challenges, prompting continuous efforts to find alternative strategies and seek support from the community. Equally significant, the cultural diversity and age differences among target groups underscored the need for more tailored participatory methods.

7. Conclusion

Returning to our theoretical framework, the emergency condition of temporality—and its exceptional character, which often serves to justify the existence of camps—was the starting point for understanding the agency of marginalised communities in the co-production of alternative urban futures. In Berlin, refugees are not only bound to an endless present; the city's rigid social-spatial structures and norms deny them the right to imagine and transform their spaces and neighbourhoods.

Within this context, actors such as BENN, who operate both within the institutional framework of the state and on the ground in direct contact with refugees and their needs, offer a means of overcoming these barriers. Their actions can provide short-term, concrete responses to refugees' aspirations. We argue that this potential, when combined with the involvement of academic actors from the fields of architecture and urbanism, can generate alternative urban futures grounded in the perspectives, wishes, and needs of marginalised communities—in this case, refugees in Marzahn-Süd—while also incorporating the viewpoints of students and researchers. Moreover, we aimed to understand how those findings and spatial knowledges could challenge hegemonic structures of power in the production of cities and spaces.

In this context, small-scale temporary actions in space can act as catalysers and mobilise communities and their wishes, and the longer-term impacts can be assured by actors such as BENN and the academia. In our cooperation with BENN, all results from the students' work were used by BENN in their dialogue with other state actors. Besides, the role of universities in this context is also to expand the reflection beyond the particular context and produce further scientific knowledge that can inform and inspire further practices.

This co-production of spatial imaginaries functions as an insurgent urbanism, inviting all participants to critically reflect on hegemonic, top-down approaches to spatial planning and design. It also challenges us to rethink our built environment in ways that not only respond to the current polycrisis but also contribute to the construction of resilient and solidary futures founded on equity and justice (Canedo, 2025).

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, provided that access complies with the participants' consent and institutional data protection regulations.

LLMs Disclosure

Since we use programs such as the LanguageTool plug-in of Microsoft Word, and Zotero, which all work with AI nowadays; we use AI search engine such as the google with AI mode, and ChatGPT; and since the article has been sent for copyediting service, where the use of AI is growing, we would like to acknowledge that the style of writing has been improved by AI, but we are fully responsible for the content and are liable for any breach of publication ethics.

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About the Authors



Qusay Amer is an architect and PhD candidate at the Habitat Unit, TU Berlin. His research examines the production of space through migration, refugees' agency, and translocal urban governance. His teaching focuses on collaborative approaches to architectural and urban interventions, framing his work through insurgent urbanism and the right to the city.



Juliana Canedo is an architect and urbanist with a doctorate in urbanism and a senior researcher at the Habitat Unit, TU Berlin. Her research focuses on collaborative methodologies with marginalised communities and conceptually works with notions of insurgent urbanism and the right to the city.