

14. It's all in the mix Berlin

Being 'poor but sexy' is over and the capital now has a new global strength.

One of the oldest quips in Berlin, more tired even than jabs at the city's airport fiasco, is about the Wedding neighbourhood. "*Der Wedding kommt!*" it says, predicting the imminent rise in standing (and property prices) in one of Berlin's poorer neighbourhoods. But for many years now Wedding has stubbornly refused to do anything of the sort. Yes, small pockets have been cleaned up and embellished to attract middle-class residents. But on the whole, and despite its convenient location just north of Mitte and close to the central train station and Tegel airport, the district has resisted attempts to make it fashionable.

The question is, how long can it hold out? Rising rents and its maligned twin, gentrification, are today the issues overshadowing everything else in Berlin. A city grown accustomed to plenty of cheap space has had to grapple with changes to its way of life. Over the past 20 years, the population of the city-proper has climbed to 3.58 million. Of course, that's still a far cry from its pre-Second World War count, when the city had more than four million residents and was notorious for its cramped and unsanitary living conditions. But it's still enough to have caused something of a reckoning.

One of the characteristics that makes Berlin so attractive is its abundance of public space. It may be the city with the second-highest population density in Germany after Munich but the buildings lining its wide pavements are rarely higher than five stories, only a handful of the 2,500-odd public parks close at night and the city's playgrounds are the object of international envy. Plus, thanks to

Berlin's structure, with its many varied boroughs rather than one city centre, the city feels much smaller (and friendlier) than it actually is.

Berliners are protective of their space. A referendum blocked plans to build housing on parts of the former Tempelhof Airport, which was closed in 2008 and is now a public park. It's an awe-inspiring expanse, a luxurious space in the middle of the city. Elsewhere, too, planning offices and local politicians are locked in standoffs with residents who are resisting attempts to erect more houses on cherished green areas. Resolving the dilemma of building more housing to slow the rise in rent while also preserving breathing space is one of the biggest challenges the city is facing.

In some central areas, the planners have decided to forego the traditional model altogether. Towers have stood at Alexanderplatz and around Bahnhof Zoo for years but the ones currently being designed by architects such as Frank Gehry are intended to act as landmarks rather than the drab eyesores that currently cluster around both squares.

Berlin's recent experience with large-scale, big-investor construction is mixed – partly due to strict regulation. Berlin's chief planner post-reunification, the architect Hans Stimmann, favoured a style of "critical reconstruction" that would respect, and often imitate, the city's Prussian roots rather than allow for reinvention, and went so far as to prescribe the ratio of glass to stone on façades (40 to 60). This resulted in what the writer Georg Diez has called "a fantasy notion of an urban landscape",

Pool your resources: Opened in 2004, the Badeschiff is a playful and popular addition to Berlin. The heated pool floats in the river Spree's east harbour and is only open in summer for swimming – in the winter it gets a roof and becomes a sauna. The project was the idea of a local artist and was designed by AMP arquitectos of Spain

