

URBAN DEVELOPMENT AND DEMOCRACY

The case of Tempelhof, Berlin

New Years' photo essay by Iván Tosics

tosics@mri.hu

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The early close down of an airport

Berlin decided to build a new airport. As one of the conditions raised in the decision-making process in order to build the new airport the existing ones (Tempelhof and Tegel) have to be closed down. Strangely enough in Berlin the closing happened earlier than the opening: Tempelhof airport was shut down on 30 October 2008 when the planned new BBI airport was not operational yet (and is not opened even at the end of 2014...) Therefore Tegel, the other existing airport could not be closed – how would a 3,5 million metropolis look like only with closed-down and still-not-opened airports?

Local referendums seem to be a *very democratic* way of decision making. This might have been the reason while the Berlin Senate organized in April 2008 a referendum about Tempelhof. Although 60% of the voters wanted to keep the then-still-functioning airport open, the city did not accept the result as the voter turnout did not reach the required minimum (which was in 2008 set to 15% of voters).



Tempelhof airport from the sky (Photo by Ivan Tosics)



Tempelhof airport (Photo by Ivan Tosics, taken from a photo exhibited at the airport building)

At the time of the April 2008 referendum many people said that a city as large as Berlin could afford to have two airports (London even keeps the City Airport besides the other four...). Germany is, however, different and if something has been decided to be shut down than it is meant serious – not even commercial uses (e.g. clinique or wellness center) were allowed as future uses which would have needed the landing of smaller plains, bringing wealthy patients.



A wreath at Tempelhof airport in November 2008 (Photo by Ivan Tosics)

An unusually large empty public field – and emerging real-estate development ideas

In May 2010 the area was opened as a public park named by the city as Tempelhofer Freedom – a field of 350 hectare site (roughly the size of New York's Central Park) space for nature conservation, leisure and pioneering activities for the city. The area soon became a beloved place of many of the Berliners.



Source: <http://www.dw.de/berlin-voters-claim-tempelhof/a-17663944>



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Visitors to Tempelhof Park can play a rather artistic version of mini golf Source: <http://nprberlin.de/post/100-tempelhofer-feld-celebrates-win-over-park-referendum> Credit Monika Mueller-Kroll / NPR Berl



Source: <http://www.findingberlin.com/my-tempelhof-utopia/>

After a few silent years, in 2013 the mayor came up with ideas for new real-estate developments. Why should such a large unused space in the middle of the city left intact? The city of Berlin bought Tempelhof airport from the German Federal Government planning to turn a part of it into an economic development zone. Moreover, as the city welcomes around 50,000 new citizens each year, also the problems of housing shortage, lack of affordable housing and rising rents have to be handled. As the head city planner told in an interview: „We need a mix of new housing and places for new businesses. If we can't build on Tempelhof, we will have to build further out, and people will have to travel further to their jobs. For the first time in 10 years, the city government has a budget for new affordable housing, but we don't have the land to build it on.”

The suggested development included to build 4,700 apartments, commercial and office spaces, as well as schools and a public library. All this was meant to cover 120 ha out of the 350-hectar former airport. The rest would have stayed as public park. According to the Senate's proposal, at least some of the earmarked apartments would have cost between 6 and 8 euros per square meter - quite a low price for Berlin. The development would have allowed less wealthy people to live in an attractive downtown area.



Zurich-based Mies van der Rohe designed plans for the new library

Source: <http://www.exberliner.com/features/lifestyle/tempelhof-dont-fence-me-in/>



Source: [http://www.thf-berlin.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Ueber die Tempelhofer Freiheit/Aktuelles neu/Downloads/Plaene/2014-Visualisierung.jpg](http://www.thf-berlin.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Ueber_die_Tempelhofer_Freiheit/Aktuelles_neu/Downloads/Plaene/2014-Visualisierung.jpg)

The development proposal was supported by all ruling political parties, the building and housing industry and many other key groups.

Quickly growing opposition to defend the public field from any new real-estate development

Berlin has quite a long history to develop population initiatives to support or fight against development ideas. In this case an initiative with the name '100 per cent Tempelhof' has been formed very quickly with the aim to protect the Tempelhof area totally (i.e. 100 percent) from any kind of real estate development. The main argument of the very mixed group (political, environmental, civil actors) behind the initiative was that the realistic and unquestionable problems raised by the Senate have to be solved on Berlin level with innovative strategies, but should not be connected directly to the Tempelhof area. They also wanted a clear housing strategy: 'We want Berlin housing policy to focus less on new construction and more on making the most out of existing homes' said one of the activists. Besides, they argued, there are many empty properties in Berlin.

Also other types of arguments were raised. The development plans will erase history, damage the environment and ruin a unique urban playground. Environmentalists claimed that losing this urban "green lung" will raise Berlin's air temperatures. 80 percent of the grounds are now designated to a protected wildlife refuge – where will those birds, bees and foxes go? And there are thousands of Berliners who think this open, untamed space is the perfect place to run, walk, bike, skate and even for asphalt kite surfing. 'Everyone is doing different things. Everyone is using the field in it's own way. It's not only the skaters, or the bikers, or people who are doing barbecues. I have seen Islamic people praying here. I have never seen this in another park somewhere else.' said another activist. Tempel-

hof developed for Berliners into a symbol of freedom and of democratic power, fighting against political and cultural restrictions.

The process towards the local referendum and the result

The citizens' initiative "100% Tempelhofer Feld" collected in January 2014 as many as 185,328 valid signatures, slightly over the required minimum of 174,117 (or 7% of the population).

This was a big success but the next step seemed to be even more difficult: the required minimum of the voter turnout rate was raised since 2008 from 15% to 25% of voters. It was a big help that the local referendum was organized in conjunction with the European Parliament elections in May 2014. Finally almost half of Berlin's 2.5 million eligible voters turned out to cast their ballot. In the referendum almost 65 percent of those who voted said no to the city's proposal, only 18.8 percent of voters supported the development plan.

In an interview after his defeat, mayor Wowereit said: "On Tempelhofer Feld it wasn't about the failure of a construction project, but about the future of this city ... we have up to 50,000 new inhabitants every year, the vacant space is getting smaller all the time. Berliners want affordable housing - but obviously not on their own front doorstep." The project's death means that the same housing and other functions have to be built elsewhere while the park will remain undeveloped for a few more legislative terms.

Democracy in urban development? Potential interpretations of this story

The readers of this story might have the feeling that it is not easy to evaluate what has happened, why this happened in this way and what the consequences will be. There are many different interpretations possible:

- victory of local democracy over top-down planning
- victory of well organized local interest groups over broader public interest
- victory of mainstream middle class groups over migrants, minority groups and the poor (the green area is used predominantly by middle class families while migrants and the nearby Turkish groups do not use the area as there are no good circumstances for them to make picnic... the open area is too huge and too open, no trees, no separation...)
- victory of environmentalists over more basic needs of society (the planned public functions can not easily be built in other parts of the city)
- local referendums, considered as most democratic way of participation, can lead to undemocratic decisions (as those people dominate the voting who have interest in the area, are active and were mobilized by a strong interest group)
- "experts" are not always negative but might represent the public interest which can not be protected by formal democratic means.

Whatever interpretations are more sympathetic to the reader, at least two big questions remain: how can Berlin's housing crisis be solved in the future? How can citizens be more effectively involved in discussions about major projects?

Lessons from the story – towards new ways of local democracy

It would be too easy to accept the above explanations and say that 'local referendums are good' or just the opposite, that 'local referendums are misleading the decision making process'. People of Berlin strongly believe in democracy and most of them are both environmentally and socially conscious. Thus we have to look for deeper interpretations, considering the following ideas developed by local observers.

Not the proposed development plans were wrong but the way they were presented and the attitude of the municipality and the developers. In the visionary drawings very upmarket buildings were shown – a potentially very costly library building and not-at-all-affordable housing. One of the NGO-s suggested to plant trees on the borderline of the green area which was promised to remain forever green but the municipality rejected this as 'we have to be flexible...'. This created widespread mistrust among the people who were in negotiations with the local government as they recognized that the city's plans weren't transparent enough.

From this it is only one more step to talk about a 'general crisis of trust between government and economic mainstream and an increasingly large group of the population that has lost belief in what government proclaims as necessary and in favour of their benefit'. These are the words of Thomas Knorr-Siedow, a Berlin based academic and close follower of the developments. As a last thought, I quote him again (from a recent paper, to be published soon in the journal *Urban Research and Practice*):

'The city's jargon is diversity oriented, democratic and participative. But many feel excluded. On the one hand there are the poor and those not fast enough to keep their position in the emerging metropolitan system of society and space. On the other hand, there is an increasingly large young and highly educated creative class that has become an engine of the city's development and lives in highly precarious economic conditions. A new theoretical conceptualisation of inclusive development and participation seems necessary.'

Let us think together with Thomas Knorr-Siedow, how this could be achieved...