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**Article — Published Version**

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International Journal of Urban and Regional Research

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

John Wiley & Sons

*Suggested Citation:* Seldin, Claudia (2025) : Temporary artwashing at the construction site: Curating Gentrification through Real Estate Marketing in Berlin, International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, ISSN 1468-2427, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, Chichester, UK, Vol. 50, Iss. 1, pp. 152-169, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.70021>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/335675>

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# – TEMPORARY ARTWASHING AT THE CONSTRUCTION SITE: Curating Gentrification through Real Estate Marketing in Berlin

CLAUDIA SELDIN

## Abstract

*Since the 1980s and 1990s, art has played a pivotal role in urban planning, especially when instrumentalized within large-scale urban renewal operations. This instrumentalization has been broadly linked to public policy schemes and public–private partnerships, often involving the implementation of spectacular cultural centers positioned as flagships for revamping entire urban brands. While large-scale arts-led urban planning still endures, today we observe a new phenomenon in the instrumentalization of art within city-making: the sponsorship of temporary artworks at the construction sites of private real estate developments for speculative and (self)marketing purposes. This article questions how this new phenomenon differs from the 1980s–90s model and how it relates to controversial planning trends of temporary urbanism/tactical urbanism. The article uses the A-Fence street-art project by developer Covivio in Berlin to illustrate how temporary artwashing during construction can revitalize a small urban area cheaply and independently while programming land speculation and gentrification following private interests. It shows how developers, in response to the vilification of the real estate sector amid Berlin’s rampant housing shortage, strategically exploit artists’ labor to revamp their own image through digital marketing, and reveals contemporary interplays between private business marketing and city marketing.*

## Introduction

In 2018, the magazine *Architectural Digest* published an article depicting art as ‘the new must-have amenity’ in projects by leading real estate developers, stressing how the latter ‘are commissioning site-specific works by notable artists, sponsoring on-site art programming, and, in some cases, even hiring staff specialists and curators to tend to their robust collections’ (Olson, 2018). At first glance, the expression ‘the new must-have amenity’ may cause some confusion. After all, the pairing of art with architectural and urban design is not a new phenomenon by any means. From the proliferation and co-optation of artists’ lofts (Zukin, 1982) to the transformation of degraded industrial sites and waterfronts into Bilbao-like complexes signed by ‘starchitects’ (Jeong and Patterson, 2020), examples of arts-led urban renewal have had a prominent place in urban theory since the 1980s and 1990s (Bianchini and Parkinson, 1993; Evans, 2001). Still, there is indeed something different about the way in which art has been instrumentalized in city-making in the past decade, especially when the art is ephemeral and its instrumentalization is guided mainly by the real estate sector. What *Architectural Digest* pinpoints as ‘new’ is the need to include *art programming* in property development, going beyond placing permanent decorative artwork on a building after its construction is concluded. The magazine defends projects that offer event-like art activities, such as ‘curator talks’, ‘art clubs’, and ‘helping people buy and

This research is a product of the official scientific cooperation between Brazil and Germany and was funded by the Brazilian Ministry of Education’s Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior—CAPES) (Finance Code 001 - Brazil) in partnership with the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation (Germany). Publishing fees were covered by the Technische Universität Berlin through the DEAL consortium. The author thanks all interviewees for their participation in the research project.

sell pieces, arts education, rotating exhibitions, and personalized services' as part of the real estate sales pitch, aiming at piquing 'the curiosity of passersby, pulling potential buyers off the street and into the sales room' (Olson, 2018). Many of these events are temporary in nature and aim to attract a specific clientele, illustrating how 'developers are tapping into buyers' desires for holistic living experiences, of which art is now often an expected part' (*ibid.*).

In cities heavily dependent on the production of art and culture for their urban branding strategies, such as Berlin, Germany (see Colomb, 2012a), examples of temporary art programming sponsored by real estate developers have multiplied quickly. In Berlin, these examples go beyond adding permanent artwork to a facade or internal wall of a building. Developers are increasingly commissioning short-term artwork or cultural events specifically for construction sites, branding the art with company logos and slogans and then advertising these (often online) as authentic urban experiences directly tied to the project they wish to sell. These commissions range from rotating street art on the fences of construction sites to the transformation of construction sites into performance halls or entertainment spaces for only a few months or weeks *prior* to their conversion into their future use.

This instrumentalization of art during the interim phase of real estate developments differs greatly from the 1980s–90s model of large-scale arts-led urban operations created through master plans as part of urban-cultural policies supported by public–private partnerships with the goal of implementing permanent cultural spaces for larger audiences and revitalizing urban economies. It also differs from the very organic temporary cultural occupations of urban voids that spread throughout Berlin in the 1990s, leading to its international recognition as a subcultural and creative city (Novy and Colomb, 2013). I argue here that, for approximately a decade, the commissioning of temporary art to adorn private construction sites in Berlin has evolved into a strategic instrument employed by the real estate sector to influence urban development toward land speculation. In addition, local urban planning professionals have actively promoted this phenomenon by endorsing the commodification of art in interim uses through hip trends of temporary/tactical urbanism (see Urban Catalyst, 2007; Oswalt *et al.*, 2013), thereby legitimizing a neoliberal model of urban development that contributes to Berlin's current housing shortage and the exploitation of the arts and of artistic labor. In other words, these imperatives constitute a direct contradiction to the responsibilities that planning professionals are expected to uphold, which therefore challenges the notion that umbrella concepts like temporary/tactical urbanism prioritize citizens' needs and voices.

In this article, I question how the phenomenon of temporary art at the private construction site and its use in marketing schemes alter the immediate urban landscape and how this phenomenon differs from previous urban renewal models heavily dependent on art. I propose that, while large-scale arts-led urban operations have used spectacular design as flagships to revitalize and sell entire city images within broader marketing campaigns run by municipalities, this small-scale private-led temporary art programming follows solely the interests of private actors, potentially leading to a type of programmed gentrification that, if not contained, may intensify displacement and urban inequalities. Furthermore, I contend that the sponsoring of temporary art by the real estate sector in Berlin, especially during the construction phase, has very little to do with fostering local artistic production for public enjoyment (as usually advertised). Instead, it consists of a manipulative PR strategy to clean up or 'wash' the sector's increasingly negative image, connected to their central role in the escalation of housing crises, speculation, and gentrification. This phenomenon could be referred to as 'temporary artwashing' conducted by the real estate sector.

It is not the goal of this article to discuss the already debated aesthetics or origins of specific types of art or how they relate to the labels of creative cities or neoliberal

urbanism (see Schacter, 2014; Seldin, 2015; 2017). My goal here is to emphasize the interplay between art and the planning trends of temporary/tactical urbanism in Berlin and the co-optation of this interplay by the real estate sector during a very specific interim phase of the development, analyzing these interplays contextually through the framework of marketing. While this article utilizes a case study centered on street art and heavily dependent on social media as a vehicle, it should be noted that many companies in Berlin have chosen other artistic modalities for interim use, such as cultural performances, clubbing and art markets, providing a broad range of possible case studies for future research.

### **Methodological notes**

Berlin was chosen for this research due to its perception internationally as a paradigmatic creative city (Novy and Colomb, 2013) and its role as a pioneer in the inclusion of interim uses (*Zwischennutzung*) in formal urban planning (Urban Catalyst, 2007). This article presents one case study: the A-Fence project commissioned by the developer Covivio in the district of Mitte. This was one of four cases included in a research project conducted from 2020 to 2023, seeking to investigate the consequences of temporary/tactical urbanism as planning trends in Berlin.

The project followed a mixed-method approach and was divided into four complementary stages. The first consisted of a transdisciplinary literature review, tackling the topics of city marketing, arts-led urban regeneration, temporary urbanism, arts sponsorship, and Berlin's planning history. The second included the collection of secondary quantitative data, especially statistics related to land value and rental prices in the immediate vicinity of the cases. Stage three consisted of the critical discourse analysis of relevant policies emerging from various administrative departments in Berlin, marketing campaigns of real estate companies, and online portfolios of artists involved in the cases. For the netnography, special attention was given to the official websites and social media profiles of companies and artists, particularly on Instagram. Lastly, ethnographic fieldwork was conducted, including participant observation with photographic documentation, and semi-structured interviews undertaken with relevant stakeholders in both English and German (translations are my own). Seven artists who participated in Covivio's A-Fence project were interviewed in person, via Zoom or email. Interviewees are referred to using gender-neutral pronouns. It is worth noting that the curator of the A-Fence project and representatives of Covivio refused interview requests, which prompts a certain interpretation of their positionality.

### **Art in large-scale urban renewal and city marketing**

The relationship between art and urban renewal is a longstanding one. For the past forty years, scholars have debated art's key role in the revitalization of degraded areas of several cities, with paradigmatic examples hailing from North America and Western Europe (Zukin, 1982; Deutsch and Ryan, 1984; Sorkin, 1992). They have discussed the inevitable confluence of urban and cultural policies in contemporary agendas and warned us about how art and culture have been increasingly instrumentalized for an attempted economic recovery of cities, especially those strongly affected by deindustrialization processes (Bianchini and Parkinson, 1993; Evans, 2001).

The economic hopes attached to the cultural sector, which led urban managers to pursue the status of 'capitals of culture' from the 1980s on (Seldin, 2017), was and still is connected to the desire to obtain distinction on a global scale. According to Bourdieu's 'theory of cultural capital' (1991), art entails a system of taste and value of political, economic and social importance, meaning that showcasing specific types of art or art spaces could help to cement a city's position of power and dominance over others. As cities became more connected, using art to stand out in the broader global network in order to compete for investments seemed like a logical strategy.

In the 2000s, as the model of arts-led urban renewal spread, consolidated planning and design formulas were replicated worldwide to achieve a coveted ‘culturalization of space’ (Vaz, 2004). Local municipalities took the lead in the revamping of urban images through city marketing (Colomb, 2012b) while entrepreneurial mayors (Sánchez, 2010; Jayne, 2012) became aware of the need to carefully craft urban brands anchored in strategically located art facilities.

What most scholars argued then was that this culturalization of space happened through punctual albeit large-scale urban or architectural projects, frequently with a spectacular character (Jacques, 2004). In urban renewal schemes, art facilities have been perceived as flagships not only to revamp devaluated areas, but also for purposes of (neoliberal) placemaking, city marketing and urban branding (Ashworth, 2009). Examples of spectacular art facilities endowed with ‘starchitecture’ (Jeong and Patterson, 2020) have ranged from the *Grand Traveaux* in Paris to the *Porto Maravilha* (Marvelous Port) in Rio de Janeiro (Sánchez and Broudehoux, 2013). In these cases, the architectural designs often took precedence over the actual art displayed inside the buildings, massively attracting tourists. The pairing of design with art, culture, and entertainment helped to rebrand cities for the international stage (Ashworth, 2009; Jakob, 2012) in a manner akin to Debord’s (1967) description of the ‘society of the spectacle’. In other words, people’s predilection for visiting (and investing in) cities became heavily dictated by images of monumental displays of art and design. One could argue that this phenomenon already implied a large-scale ‘design-washing’ or ‘artwashing’ driven by municipalities, who counted on private stakeholders to fund their visions and help clean up their cities’ declining images, making way for the popular public–private partnership model (see Codecasa and Ponzini, 2011).

The definition of artwashing used here follows that found in the grey literature (O’Sullivan, 2014; Jones, 2016; Francis, 2017; Sommer, 2021) and academic essays (Miranda and Lane-McKinley, 2017; Mould, 2017; Pritchard, 2017; Ruck, 2020), which position it as part of broader neoliberal tendencies:

The concept of artwashing explains how the work of artists can be used to portray a show of creativity, coolness and utilizes an aesthetic that becomes a form of capital implicated in processes of gentrification leading to the longer-term exclusion or ‘pricing out’ of existing communities (Ruck, 2020: 405-6).

By the 2000s, the negative consequences of this neoliberal culturalization of space had been widely discussed and condemned. Much had been said about starchitecture projects contributing to the ‘festivalization of urban policy’ (Häußermann and Siebel, 1993), bankrupting cities, causing immense delays in construction (Evans, 2003), leading to overtourism, giving rise to intolerance campaigns discouraging visitors of specific profiles (Novy, 2013), to land speculation driving rents to unthinkable figures, and, of course, to gentrification, especially of the pioneering kind (Deutsche, 1996; Holm, 2013; Novy and Colomb, 2013). Given the fact that this large-scale artwashing was being amply criticized for furthering existing urban inequalities, the mid-2000s saw the need for a shift in the narrative of international planning and design formulas that drove the culturalization of space. This shift entailed a revamping of urban branding narratives from the spectacular capitals of culture to the authentic creative city (Seldin, 2017).

Many of the 21st century policies geared towards the creative city label were influenced by US economist Richard Florida’s (2002) controversial ‘theory of the creative class’, which divided cities into ‘winners and losers’ and senselessly glorified the instrumentalization of the arts and gentrifiers. Regardless of the intensive critique of this theory, government representatives and policy makers worldwide saw an opportunity to rebrand their cities as ‘creative’. In so doing, they intended to attract more than just cultural tourists and investors, aiming especially at new young inhabitants in ‘creative’

professions able to heat up the economy. Suddenly, urban managers and planning professionals alike began to praise the construction of ‘authentic’ places with specific urban amenities that appeased younger generations. Unlike in previous years, the focus of city marketing turned from the spectacular cultural centers embedded in large-scale urban renewal operations to smaller-scale and more ‘authentic’ artistic spaces. This fetishization of the authentic urban character and ‘grit’ (Zukin, 2010) led city marketing campaigns to co-opt and appropriate the image of existing alternative movements and art spaces deemed organic and cool. Street art, underground music scenes (techno or hip hop, for example), and subversive cultural squats were quickly incorporated into marketing schemes of creative cities, turning seedy sites into popular points of attraction. A focus on these authentic spaces appealed more to millennial creative mobile workers than the previous formula of the ‘McGuggenheim’ city did (Scott, 2008). From the perspective of city marketing, the 21st century brought a shift in how art could be instrumentalized in order to revamp outdated urban brands.

It is clear that these urban brands should not be understood as exclusionary but as complementary. The instrumentalization of art on a spectacular scale and on a small scale can exist simultaneously, with different urban brands being used or paired in marketing discourses depending on the interests at play. While it is not the aim of this article to dwell on the long-discussed implications of the creative city narrative (or its current decline), it is important to stress that this shift in policies praising small-scale authenticity has affected the urban sphere immensely, as it has strengthened the focus on punctual interventions conducted by private actors, legitimizing a neoliberal view of city-making in favor of integrated urban planning. This neoliberal view is evident through the spread of trends such as (creative) placemaking and temporary/tactical urbanism, which themselves tend to emphasize the speculative potential of small-scale, ephemeral, and DIY interventions to regenerate degraded land cheaply while appropriating (and often exploiting) the work of artists and local communities (Mould, 2014).

### **Artwashing and *Zwischennutzung* in formal planning: Berlin as a pioneer**

The trends of (creative) placemaking and temporary/tactical urbanism describe short-term, cheap, and punctual spatial interventions conducted on a small scale by diverse actors such as governments, planning professionals, NGOs, and citizens. The advocates of these trends often present them as fuzzy umbrella concepts directly tied to the creative city narrative, incorporating everything from yarnbombing, parklets, bike lines, graffiti, street signs and guerrilla gardening to cultural squats, demonstrations and other politically charged interventions that take place temporarily in public spaces (Bishop and Williams, 2012; Lydon and Garcia, 2015).

These trends gained strength in the 2010s due to their seemingly participatory character. They glorify the DIY quality of so-called ‘tactical’ interventions, placing the responsibility of city-making in the hands of citizens, claiming that the state is too bureaucratic and slow to make real change happen (Lydon and Garcia, 2015). There is no shortage of how-to guides, commonly issued by architects and planners, framing ordinary designs as miraculous solutions for complex problems (see Glaser *et al.*, 2013). These often present a potpourri of colorful interventions as simplified ‘best practices’ to be replicated worldwide, disregarding cities’ singularities in the name of a creative homogenization.

The problems deriving from placemaking and temporary/tactical urbanism are manifold. First, they equalize extremely different interventions, disregarding the actors and interests behind them, thus contributing to emptying the meaning of more politically charged spatial occupations (Spataro, 2016). Second, in pursuing ‘cool’ aesthetics, they contribute to the aforementioned homogenization of spaces and the banalization of design solutions, often posed as one-size-fits-all formulas for different contexts. The

many how-to guides tied to these trends often suggest simplistic interventions that originate in North American and European cities as solutions for Latin America, Asia and Africa, portraying these regions as problematic and downplaying their cultural backgrounds and the complexity of structural problems derived from inefficient policies and inequalities (see Seldin *et al.*, 2020). Third, these trends often lead to the further exploitation and precarity of communities and artists, who are paid nothing or little for their work in exchange for hard labor and temporary/low-quality workspace. Lastly, while temporary/tactical urbanism claims to be participatory, it can encourage the state to withdraw even more from its duty of providing efficient infrastructure and quality urban spaces to citizens. That is why many scholars speak of the undeniable link between placemaking/tactical urbanism and neoliberal urbanism (Mould, 2014; Madanipour, 2018; Ferreri, 2021). They show us that temporality in the urban sphere can act as a powerful catalyst, not for creativity, but for unequal profit-making.

What placemaking/temporary/tactical urbanism advocates often downplay is that private sectors, especially real estate and construction, have also identified the profitable potential of temporary urban interventions, particularly those involving art, which can quickly revitalize and raise the value of land due to its aesthetic and symbolic power (see Bourdieu, 1991). This is particularly evident in Berlin – a city with large portions of urban voids due to its division until 1989–90. The organic and often improvised cultural occupation of these urban voids led Berlin to be considered a pioneer in the practice of creative interim uses of space, locally known as *Zwischennutzung* (Colomb, 2017).

*Zwischennutzung* has strong ties to Berlin's urban history and culture, as well as to the city's carefully constructed creative brand. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the city presented a large number of empty buildings and derelict sites inherited from the former death-strips adjacent to the Wall. Some of this land was plagued by uncertain property status dating back to the expropriations of World War II (Reimann, 1997). As the Wall fell, leading many East Germans to flee west, several artists moved in the opposite direction, heading toward East Berlin to occupy the cheap or unused land with improvised studios, galleries, performance venues, and nightclubs. Famous examples were the Kunsthaus Tacheles, a cultural squat installed at a former department store and evicted in 2013, and the techno club Tresor, initially located in the underground safe of an abandoned bank (see Seldin, 2015). In the years following the German reunification in 1990, many of these artists were granted permission to remain at the informally occupied sites, often signing decades-long contracts stipulating the free use of land or the payment of a low symbolic rent to prevent vandalism or the occupation by more 'harmful' squatters while the property issues were being settled (*ibid.*).

After a few years, these organic types of *Zwischennutzung* contributed to raising the profile and, consequently, the land value of certain districts, now deemed 'cool' due to the presence of artists, following classic patterns of pioneer gentrification (see Holm, 2013). Immediately, the phenomenon attracted the attention of planning professionals, policy makers and developers. This was evident in the European Commission-funded research project 'Urban Catalyst', which focused on Berlin, Helsinki, Amsterdam, Vienna and Naples from 2001 to 2003. Urban Catalyst was led by a group of architects, planners, lawyers, and state representatives, who together built a clear neoliberal narrative defending how formal urban planning and city marketing should incorporate temporary uses of space instigated by private entities (including real estate companies) to mirror organic examples of *Zwischennutzung*. The project unapologetically advocated for an 'entrepreneurial temporary use' (Urban Catalyst, 2007: 101) of urban space tied to the creative economy and the upgrading of the image of land: 'temporary use is a potential means of communicating a positive image or, when a location's initial purpose has been abandoned, of changing its image, which in turn helps to attract clients able to pay rent for it' (*ibid.*: 144).

To highlight the co-opting of this subcultural image of *Zwischennutzung*, Urban Catalyst (2007: 139) cited Universal Music's former CEO's claim that he had 'built [their] palace in a swamp intentionally, and the swamp better not dry out'. The 2002 inauguration of the Berlin branch of Universal Music is considered a landmark of the controversial urban operation MediaSpree, which proposed the construction of creative clusters along the River Spree, until then a region dominated by makeshift bars, parties, and squats. The operation sparked protests for years due to its gentrifying nature and subsequent displacement of pioneer users (Joost, 2012), many of which had previously been portrayed in Berlin's official city marketing campaigns as emblems of its authentic, creative character. This exaltation of Berlin as a 'swamp' echoed former mayor Klaus Wowereit's infamous quote, deeming the city 'poor, but sexy' (Frank, 2023: 114). Its 'sexy' side referred precisely to the abundance of subversive expressions, such as street art, which could be easily co-opted for profit.

Street art has played a large role in building Berlin's creative brand due to its distinct visual aesthetic and inherently ephemeral nature, capable of naturally evoking the authenticity celebrated by temporary urbanism advocates. Its co-optation by private entities for commercial purposes—exemplified through this article's case study and the proliferation of books, museums and tours in Berlin on the topic—demonstrates how a once political and activist art modality has been domesticated within neoliberal urbanism schemes (see Schacter, 2014).

In the 2000s, Berlin's municipality and planning professionals began to encourage the replication of *Zwischennutzung* in a manner that was no longer organic, but superficially crafted and financially driven (see Oswalt *et al.*, 2015). This legitimization of temporary urbanism as a tool for urban development actually targeted land speculation, leading to changes in policy and building codes to encourage more interim uses in Berlin, provided that they were conducted or intermediated by specific actors (Colomb, 2017: 135). In fact, the concept of *Zwischennutzung* has become so prominent in Berlin's urban policy that the local Department for Urban Development, Construction and Housing (*Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung, Bauen und Wohnen*) now cites it as one of the goals of its 'Sustainable Renewal' program (*Nachhaltige Erneuerung Program*). The program's website mentions the need for private investments in the city and claims that the conversion or interim use of fallow areas is one of its main focuses to achieve structural improvement and long-term stabilization.<sup>1</sup> Berlin's 2015 Land Use Plan (*Flächennutzungsplan*) also highlights benefits for construction in certain areas provided that the buildings are of mixed-use,<sup>2</sup> which includes cultural activities. This was also mentioned by interviewees, who claimed that some real estate companies in Berlin had sponsored temporary art events during the construction phase of their developments to fit into this 'mixed-use' category in order to obtain building permits for residential developments in sites in which they would otherwise not be available (interview by author, 22 March 2024). Similarly, the newspaper *Tagesspiegel* has denounced how developers proposed temporary art in order to obtain permits for their projects in the district of Marzahn (Zawatka-Gerlach, 2018; Schmitz, 2024). This points to a definite lack of transparency in the equation involving art, public policy, and real estate interests.

Arts sponsoring can be understood as a key real estate strategy, since companies frequently offer art or public amenities in exchange for tax benefits or to bypass urban parameters in an untransparent way (Wu, 2002: 189–91). This is exemplified in Berlin by the State Building Directive 130 (*Anweisung Bau des Landes Berlin 130*) designed by the Department for Culture and Social Cohesion (*Senatsverwaltung für Kultur und*

1 Senatsverwaltung für stadtentwicklung, bauen und wohnen [Department for urban development, construction and housing] (2024) *Flächennutzungsplan* [Land use plan] [WWW document]. URL <https://www.berlin.de/sen/stadtentwicklung/planung/flaechennutzungsplanung/flaechennutzungsplan-fnp/> (accessed 24 July 2024).

2 *Ibid.*

*Gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhalt*). This directive mandates the public sector to include art in every publicly developed construction project ‘involving buildings, civil engineering structures, transport facilities and landscaping’.<sup>3</sup> The department currently has open calls for programs funding art in the building sector, such as ‘Architectural Art’ (*Kunst am Bau*), which can include representatives of architectural firms and museums in selection juries.

What these policies reveal is not necessarily a state patronage of the arts, but an official sanctioning of temporary art as a loophole by private actors to bypass urban regulations and guide land use, legitimizing these actors as the main drivers of contemporary urban development. That means that today, real estate companies no longer need state-led large-scale urban renewal operations or integrated urban planning guidelines to revitalize areas of their interest. They can take advantage of revised policies and codes legitimized by neoliberal planning trends to build as they please while acupuncturally revamping the vicinity of their future properties through art with little investment, and squeezing profit from all phases of the development, including the actual construction phase. In doing so, real estate companies autonomously create ‘pioneer locations’ for gentrification (see Holm, 2013: 174). Additionally, they tout their art patronage through promoting a narrative of sociocultural legacy via social media campaigns, positioning themselves as culturally conscious, despite widespread public outrage over the shortage of affordable housing that they instigate.

### **Temporary artwashing by the real estate sector at the construction site**

Temporary artwashing conducted by the real estate sector at the construction site occurs when developers sponsor artwork or lend their sites to artistic events for a short period during the building phase. This act of patronage is then used as part of the company’s marketing, often linking the artistic activity to the natural creative vocation of the block or street. Even though these developments may be facilitated by public urban policy, the developers are the main decision makers about which specific part of the city will have its image revamped through private investments, later profiting from this image renewal, which deeply affects the land value of adjacent blocks and streets and, consequentially, the social and economic dynamics of local communities.

The idea behind this type of artwashing is that, unlike with big cultural facilities, very few people get the chance to experience construction sites turned into art installations that have an expiration date, or to say that they own or rent property that underwent this exclusive event. This gives the land a character of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984), which is then transferred to buyers/renters by proxy, making them more willing to pay higher amounts for the land. The notion of the event is key here. As Bauman (2011) puts it, it allows for the instantaneous consumption of culture with no need for long-term investments or compromise on the part of the cultural producers. From a business perspective, temporary events also allow a faster turnover, as well as multiple uses of a site, leading capital to flow more quickly (Harvey, 2010). Moreover, the amount of (private) capital invested in a temporary event is far lower than that of large permanent cultural facilities for a broader audience. This is not only due to the smaller scale of the development, but because this phenomenon usually involves the exploitation of artists’ labor, as indicated by the case study ahead.

### **The A-Fence by Covivio at Alexanderplatz**

The A-Fence is a street-art initiative sponsored by the French real estate company Covivio, located at the Alexanderplatz square in the central district of Berlin-Mitte. Covivio operates across Europe and is the third largest proprietor of real estate in Berlin, owning a total of 15,970 residential units in the city in 2019 (Schneider, 2020: 20).

The A-Fence consists of a series of street art panels painted over a fence approximately 200 meters in length around the construction site for Covivio's future mixed-use tower (see Figure 1). The art project, which began in 2019, has been divided into four thematic phases (ongoing at the time of writing), each one featuring new pieces from different artists. For its first phase, Covivio hired Yasha Young, the director of the graffiti-themed Urban Nation Museum in Berlin to curate one artist to paint the whole fence. For the second phase, two artists were selected by the new curator Diana Marossek of the agency Street Art Berlin. This phase introduced the theme 'we are Europe' (*wir sind Europe*). Interestingly, this theme coincided with the launch of Berlin's new city marketing campaign in 2020, whose slogan is 'we are one Berlin' (*wir sind ein Berlin*) and aims to pose the German capital as a connected knowledge and tech hub. The themes for the subsequent phases, launched in 2021 and 2023, respectively, were 'flourishing' (*frblühen*) and 'metamorphosis' (*metarmorphose*), which interestingly denote the idea of constant change and temporality. Since 2021, the fence has been divided into a series of smaller panels to feature more rotating work by different artists. Each panel displays a large white sign with the name of the artist, a brief description of the piece, and a QR code that leads to the A-Fence website (see Figure 2).

Overall, the artists chosen for the project have an international background, with only a few being German. The group consists of a somewhat diverse mix, featuring a couple of names that are more recognizable in the international gallery/museum circuit and many who described themselves in interviews as still struggling to achieve a position of prominence.

When advertising the A-Fence, Covivio stresses the company's link to public policy, playing up their commitment to art by citing the French Ministry of Culture's 2018 policy '1 building, 1 work' (*1 immeuble, 1 œuvre*), 'an initiative created to encourage private operators to commission artworks' (Covivio, 2023). The official online platforms for the A-Fence emphasize the project's intent to promote 'the development of artists in the belief that art contributes to the identity of a place and the construction of a shared space, while stimulating exchange and creativity' (Covivio, 2024). Ironically, only one interviewee who participated in the A-Fence claimed to have drawn inspiration from the identity of Alexanderplatz into creating their piece, while others refrained from depicting themes related to Berlin. However, many interviewees made sure to mention that they viewed Alexanderplatz as a grey transit area, lacking permanence (interviews



**FIGURE 1** The A-Fence around the construction site of Covivio's future hybrid tower at Alexanderplatz (source: Claudia Seldin, June 2021)



**FIGURE 2** Examples of the artwork and signs featured in the A-Fence project (source: Claudia Seldin, March 2022)

by author, 11, 15, 21 and 28 March 2022). Some disclosed that the one special request made by Covivio was the use of warm colors to attract attention to the site, with one artist stating the need to get ‘rid of [Alexandeplatz’s] greyish urbanism’ (interview by author, 21 March 2022). This could justify Covivio’s choice of street art for this particular project, as it strengthens the company’s narrative of ‘bring[ing] the urban space to life with their artworks’.<sup>4</sup>

This narrative centered on the need to bring the Alexanderplatz to life is an interesting one, given its status as one of Berlin’s most visited tourist sites with approximately 360,000 people circulating daily (Covivio, 2024). Its success is largely due to the presence of landmarks such as the TV Tower (*Fernsehturm*), the World Clock (*Weltzeituhr*), and a variety of shopping facilities, including a branch of the department store Galeria. During the Cold War, Alexanderplatz was known as the center of urban life in East Berlin. Today, despite its touristic status and recognition as a major transport hub, the area is not well-liked by many locals, who share Covivio’s perceptions of it as a chaotic and grey transit area. This could be because the square’s post-reunification urban renewal has not happened according to plan. The intention to revamp and densify it through the construction of eleven skyscrapers has existed since architect Hans Kollhoff’s 1993 winning master plan, but economic stagnation has prevented full implementation and construction (Beveridge *et al.*, 2022).

In recent years, a new plan was agreed upon with the Berlin Senate to build four skyscrapers of between 130 and 150 meters in height on the square, including the one developed by Covivio and enclosed by the A-Fence. Covivio’s tower will include 63,000 m<sup>2</sup> of ‘office space, flex offices, retail, catering areas, apartments, a daycare center and a ‘garden club’ with a terrace’,<sup>5</sup> perfectly fitting into the municipality’s policies targeting mixed-use properties. The other planned towers are meant to focus on residential use (initially developed by the Russian group MonArch) and commercial use (the Mynd tower by Signa). These new enterprises are bound to contribute to the already increasing rental prices for both commercial and residential units in the vicinity.

4 A-Fence [WWW document]. URL <https://www.a-fence.eu/en/> (accessed 5 April 2025).

5 Covivio: living real estate [WWW document]. URL <https://www.covivio.immo/office/portfolio/alexanderplatz/> (accessed 1 August 2024).

In fact, Covivio's choice of the central area of Alexanderplatz to implement a flagship artwashing initiative is strategic. Statistics prove that investment in commercial real estate in Berlin is at an all-time high, with office rental prices having increased from EUR 19.15 per m<sup>2</sup> in 2018 to EUR 29.00 per m<sup>2</sup> in 2023.<sup>6</sup> Ironically, much of the newly built office space in the city seems to remain vacant. In 2023, there were 135,700 m<sup>2</sup> of vacant office space in the district of Mitte alone.<sup>7</sup> This figure escalates to a total of 984,000 m<sup>2</sup> in the whole city.<sup>8</sup> Simultaneously, the percentage of vacant housing in Berlin in 2022 was down to just 0.3%—the lowest since 2001.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, residential rental prices continue to rise exponentially, detonating waves of gentrification in several districts (Bernt, 2022). From 2018 to 2024, the average residential rent in Berlin increased from EUR 9.76 per m<sup>2</sup> to EUR 14.93 per m<sup>2</sup>.<sup>10</sup> In Mitte, prices reached EUR 15.19 per m<sup>2</sup> in 2022. The rental portal Spotahome<sup>11</sup> showed that the cost in 2024 of a studio apartment of around 30 m<sup>2</sup> close to Alexanderplatz ranged from EUR 43 to EUR 116 per m<sup>2</sup>. The need for housing as opposed to the increase in investment in office space (which is likely to remain empty) begs the question of why such developments are being built and whose interests are prioritized.

Still far from completion at the time of writing, the construction of the new towers at Alexanderplatz has already sparked controversy and led to negative impacts on the surroundings. In October 2022, the construction of Covivio's tower damaged the structure of the underground station and tunnel beneath the square, leading to the partial interruption for approximately ten months of one of the city's most important metro lines. Newspapers claimed that the walls of the Alexanderplatz U2 station had cracked, and the structure had sunk by several centimeters (Neumann, 2022). Moreover, the company MonArch tried to back out of its deal to build the second tower using the Russian war on the Ukraine as its reason, leading the Berlin Senate to threaten to intervene in land negotiations. The lack of transparency regarding local policy makers' dealings with real estate developers is even more evident with the Mynd tower project, adjacent to the bankrupt Galeria department store. Citing a need to prevent job losses, the Senate bypassed standard procedure to approve this 134 m high tower along with two other future developments by the company Signa at the hip locations of Kurfürstendamm and Hermannplatz, in exchange for keeping the Galeria open for only three more years (Roelcke, 2023).

In 2022, the construction fences for the Mynd tower, covered in images of 3D architectural renderings of luxury mixed-use spaces and happy office atmospheres, were the target of protest tagging<sup>12</sup> (Figure 3), with phrases including 'Who owns the city? Who owns the bank?' (*Wem gehört die Stadt? Wem gehört die Bank?*); 'Do you own the city just because you have more money?' (*Gehört euch die stadt, nur weil ihr mehr geld*

6 Statista (2024) *Mietpreise für büroflächen in Berlin bis 2023* [Rental prices for office space in Berlin until 2023], 23 January [WWW document]. URL <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/177523/umfrage/entwicklung-der-mietpreise-von-bueroflaechen-in-berlin-seit-2003/> (accessed 30 July 2024).

7 Statista research department (2024) *Leerstand von büroflächen in Berlin nach lage 2023* [Vacancy of office space in Berlin by location 2023], 6 February [WWW document]. URL <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/633476/umfrage/leerstand-von-bueroflaechen-in-berlin-nach-lage/> (accessed 30 July 2024).

8 Statista (2024) *Leerstand von büroflächen in Berlin bis 2023* [Vacancy of office space in Berlin until 2023], 2 April [WWW document]. URL <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/177525/umfrage/leerstand-von-bueroflaechen-in-berlin-seit-2003/> (accessed 30 July 2024).

9 Statista (2024) *Leerstandsquote von wohnungen in Berlin bis 2022* [Vacancy of residential space in Berlin until 2023], 3 January [WWW document]. URL <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/258439/umfrage/leerstandsquote-von-wohnungen-in-berlin/> (accessed 30 July 2024).

10 Statista (2024) *Entwicklung der mietpreise auf dem Berliner wohnungsmarkt bis 2024* [Development of rental prices on the Berlin housing market until 2024], 10 September [WWW document]. URL <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/535119/umfrage/mietpreise-auf-dem-wohnungsmarkt-in-berlin/> (accessed 4 October 2024).

11 Spotahome [WWW document]. URL <https://www.spotahome.com/de/s/berlin/for-rent:studios?sortBy=POI&poiLat=52.521918&poiLng=13.413215&mapCenter=52.52205101168941,13.410834032603782> (accessed 8 October 2024).

12 Tagging, a form of text-based graffiti, is often used in protest art to allow people to express themselves, challenge authority, and reclaim public areas.



**FIGURE 3** Anonymous protest tagging on the fence of the Mynd tower's construction site (source: Claudia Seldin, October 2022)

*habt?*); 'This is no longer our city' (*Dit is nicht mehr unsere stadt*); and 'Where do they get their money from? I can't afford an apartment here anymore' (*Wo haben die bloß ihr geld her? Ick kann mir hier keine wohnung mehr leisten*). This type of tagging expresses the local population's frustration with increasing rent prices and the recognition of the real estate sector as a driver of urban problems. Meanwhile, the artwork on the A-Fence was left mostly untagged. It is unknown if that was due to respect of activist taggers for the commissioned artists, or to the presence of police surveillance directly in front of the A-Fence. As expected, the tagged Mynd fences were soon replaced by new fences. This action of erasing the protest tagging but leaving the commissioned Covivio murals highlights the silencing of the original outspoken character of street art and its increasing domestication in the context of neoliberal urbanism (see Schacter, 2014: 162).

### **Discussion: artwashing, marketing and social media**

The controversy surrounding the real estate developments at Alexanderplatz is not ignored by the artists hired for the A-Fence project. Interviews showed their awareness of Covivio's intentions to use their art to revamp the square's image, possibly aiming to raise its land value. Some interviewees mentioned that they had received criticism from other local artists, who viewed their collaboration with Covivio as an indirect contribution to the city's gentrification waves (interviews by author, 15 and 31 March 2022). In fact, discussions on the ways in which artwork has been co-opted and street art has been stripped of its resistant character have been hot topics for Berlin-based artists since renowned artists Blu and Hencke symbolically erased one of their most famous murals to prevent its being co-opted by the architectural project Cuvry Campus. They also published a manifesto against gentrification in *The Guardian* in 2014 (see Seldin, 2017: 161). This conflict between artists and their perceptions of their roles in gentrification processes in Berlin goes beyond the scope of this article and will be dealt with in a separate paper. It should be noted, however, that some interviewees rejected the notion of being co-opted by Covivio, defending their negotiation with the company as being fair and transparent.

While all interviewed artists received payment for their work, the amount seemed to vary according to the phase, size of the panel, and artist, with one interviewee disclosing payment at around EUR 2,000 for their piece, which was deemed too little

in comparison to their usual fees, but enough given the exposure and the added value to their personal portfolios (interview by author, 11 March 2022). This fact backs the arguments made by the local artists regarding the exploitation of labor involved in artwashing practices by developers.

Local artists interviewed for this project claim that real estate companies are exploiting artists' labor, as they are often paid little or even asked to pay rent to use the construction sites, despite their artwork being used for the company's marketing. In fact, many artists who agree to collaborate with these companies may end up falling victim to their own actions. This is backed by statistics, showing that 'every year in Berlin, 350 artist studios are lost due to speculative development' (Ferguson, 2019: 136).

To defend their collaboration with Covivio, many interviewees argued that the positive impact of their art on people's daily lives should be taken into consideration (interview by author, 28 March 2022). One artist rejected the term 'artwashing' to describe their involvement with real estate companies, saying 'it's a brutal way to say that we are pawns in a game of chess', but at the same time admitting that '[Covivio is] maybe trying to prep [Alexanderplatz] into a residential area' (interview by author, 15 March 2022). They added:

Public art is definitely used as a tool to aid property value. And unfortunately, the problem is the money has to come from somewhere, right? And often it comes from property developers because they're smart and ... they can see that, by injecting culture into an area, there's increased property value and rent, which is beneficial to them. So, it's an investment, I mean, why else would they do it? From the kindness of their hearts? (*ibid.*).

Despite the company's narrative positioning itself as an arts-friendly business, almost all interviewees admitted to feeling conflicted about possibly contributing to gentrification in Berlin. Most understandably emphasized that they needed this type of work to ensure their livelihood through art. The term 'artwashing' was even brought up by one artist spontaneously:

So, this was the first time I [thought] about the aspect of artwashing. And this is it clearly ... there's a company and they're building real estate in the middle of the town and not directly on this place [Alexanderplatz], but it could be that this company is also responsible for gentrification in different parts of the city and ... I have to ask myself if I want to be part of that. But this is kind of a grey area. It's much [easier to] say I wouldn't have done such a thing for McDonald's or Starbucks ... or a company that is producing weapons ... But, you have here the possibility to show work in the center of a big metropolitan city, you get paid for that, but on the other hand, it's kind of a deal with the devil. So, you are balancing the advantages and disadvantages and ... I decided to do it because of the positive aspects I was pulling out of this. Also, I was trusting [that the curator] was bringing me projects that wouldn't harm my artistic integrity. Then I came up with a kind of ... Robin Hood-like idea that, even if I am bringing my artistic character into a system, which is using it for artwashing, I'm pulling money or even logistics out of that company to do good things (interview by author, 21 March 2022).

In describing their reasoning for collaborating with Covivio, many interviewees highlighted the undeniable exposure gained through a large piece of art in a central location in a big European capital. Most claimed that, regardless of the amount paid, this was indisputably an opportunity for exposure that could contribute to their consolidation in the mainstream art market (interviews by author, 11, 18 and 21 March 2022). This

relates to new ways of digital art consumption (and urban economy), prompted by online exposure and sharing. It is precisely because street art is temporary that social media has become so undeniably important for artists, allowing the work to 'have a longer life and a larger audience as a digital object' (MacDowall and de Souza, 2018: 6). The interviewees stressed the importance of passersby posting, sharing and tagging images of their work on social media in increasing their visibility, claiming that platforms such as Instagram are now essential for their livelihood.

we are grateful for the opportunity to showcase our urban art in a public space of such centrality and reach in terms of audience. This is something not to take for granted since we do not have access to premium art spaces in commercial galleries with their higher-class clientele ... We have received a lot of positive feedback ranging from media coverage to people following us on social media and creating posts and stories with this artwork (interview by author, 18 March 2022).

I wouldn't be able to survive without social media. When they are posting my work ... more eyes are seeing it, therefore it translates to more followers and the wheel keeps turning (interview by author, 15 March 2022).

These quotes exemplify how social media has become an essential tool in marketing schemes involving private art patronage in cities. Posting images of the A-Fence on Instagram can act not only as a much-needed portfolio for the artist, but also as a cheap and effective marketing strategy for Covivio and the municipality. By having their under-construction properties advertised on the artist's profiles, Covivio attracts attention from a larger audience that would not necessarily follow the online profile of a real estate company. That is why Covivio's Instagram profile is dominated by posts of artwork at their properties all over Europe, clearly presenting the firm as an urban art curator of sorts. This also explains why the media campaign for the A-Fence was intense, including filming the painting process and interviews with the artists, creating an official website, sending press releases to portals that specialize in art and real estate, and even establishing joint hashtags with the artists in advance (interview by author, 28 March 2022).

Berlin's policy makers also profit from the online spread of these images, showing a city that legitimizes street art (even if it is paid for from private pockets and is selectively placed). The more 'likes' and positive comments initiatives like the A-Fence and their artists receive, the more likely it is that the city will attract new investors who perceive it as being in demand. With that in mind, official city marketing profiles also showcase these private-led artwashing initiatives, advertising certain districts or blocks as highly desirable, thus contributing to raising their land value as well. As observed by Boy and Uitermark (2017: 612) in writing about Amsterdam, these 'social media representations reflect and reinforce processes of gentrification as Instagram users partake in the aestheticization of everyday life and promote places of high-end consumption'. It is not accidental that the official Instagram profiles for Berlin and its tourism portal VisitBerlin, with more than 450,000 followers, often post photos of various murals in hip districts with captions such as 'We love street art, especially when the artworks are as impressive as this one' (*wir lieben streetart besonders, wenn die kunstwerke so imposant sind wie dieses hier*),<sup>13</sup> or 'Berlin has so many pretty façades'.<sup>14</sup>

13 *Hauptstadtportal* [Capital portal] (2022) *Instagram*, 12 September [WWW document]. URL <https://www.instagram.com/p/CiPtp6nMpKJ/> (accessed 8 August 2024).

14 *VisitBerlin* (2024) *Instagram*, 13 May [WWW document]. URL <https://www.instagram.com/p/C66PYewMwEf/> (accessed 8 August 2024).

This proves the value of displaying small-scale artwork on private property and the power of private actors to dictate which city image should be selected as being officially representative (or sellable) through a type of ‘digital placemaking’ (see Basaraba, 2021), merging real and virtual urban images as objects of desire.

Cases like the A-Fence show us that stakeholders, such as the municipality, real estate companies, and even hired artists, may have a stronger influence on which city representation is the ‘official’ one on the virtual urban stage. The stratified and segmented world of social media ends up influencing a de facto change in the city fabric and its dynamics, moving ‘uneven relations’ from the real world to the digital one (Boy and Uitermark, 2017: 613). In this sense, the very temporality of social media (and digital communication technology) can be perceived as an asset, allowing old images to fade, and new, more interesting ones, to quickly take their place. In a frenetic depiction of Bauman’s (2011) exaltation of the ‘event’ for contemporary culture, what we really consume with this type of artwashing is a virtual, temporary representation of temporary art in a temporary urban space.

Overall, the impact of the A-Fence artwork and its online marketing on the wider public circulating at Alexanderplatz is hard to measure. Because the start of the A-Fence project coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic and strict lockdowns in Germany, the famous square faced periods of unexpectedly low visitor levels. Even after the lockdowns had ended, participant observation led to the conclusion that only a small percentage of passersby stopped to look at the panels, with even fewer scanning the QR codes. This impression was shared by some interviewed artists, who claimed not to have received as much feedback on Instagram as they had anticipated. In fact, two artists claimed to have received negative feedback on site while painting the murals, being called out for their contribution to gentrification or criticized for the fact that, to set up the construction, the only trees in the Alexanderplatz were cut down (interviews by author, 15 and 28 March 2022). Ironically, the colorful A-Fence contributed to washing away the only natural color that had existed at the grey site.

### **Final considerations**

This article has examined ways in which the instrumentalization of temporary art sponsored by real estate companies at Berlin’s construction sites can strengthen a model of urban development that is increasingly spearheaded by private interests and encouraged by neoliberal planning trends and selective digital placemaking. It shows how this phenomenon differs from previous models of large-scale arts-led urban renewal tied to spectacular cultural facilities embedded in city marketing strategies and led by municipalities or public–private partnerships. Unlike these models, which favored the construction of permanent cultural spaces to be enjoyed by the larger public and to function as business cards for their cities, the phenomenon described here turns the museum or art gallery into an ephemeral experience within a private property, working as subliminal marketing targeting a select group of people able to afford the high prices of occupying a place that is marked by a type of authentic distinction.

This temporary artwashing in Berlin is inspired by original, organic cultural *Zwischennutzung* examples that once reflected the city’s very singular patterns of land occupation, but have now been co-opted by private actors. Unfortunately, this co-opting has been influenced largely by advocates of umbrella concepts such as creative placemaking and temporary/tactical urbanism, who ignore the historical roots of *Zwischennutzung* in the hope of replicating its most unfortunate consequences, namely land speculation and gentrification. These concepts that glorify short-term DIY urban interventions, especially through art, show us how planning professionals are increasingly complicit in neoliberal urbanism, instead of tackling integrated planning to deal with complex and contextualized urban issues.

The A-Fence case reflects how temporary artwashing is a cheap yet profitable strategy by developers to revamp the small-scale quickly with the aim of gentrifying the location prior to the completion of the construction, for the purpose of benefiting future sales. Additionally, they use this strategy to rebrand themselves (mostly digitally) as performers of an important sociocultural urban role in an attempt to clean up their negative image. This strategy is especially important in Berlin, where gentrification has moved from a concept present in urban theory books to commonplace in everyday conversations (Holm, 2013) that rightfully blame the sector for current urban struggles.

While the A-Fence focuses on the co-optation of street art, the research for this article has shown that the type (and quality) of the art chosen by private developers is not as relevant as the temporality of the art itself, which guarantees a quick turnover and dynamism to the image of the site, leading to faster flows of capital and a constant process of image (re)making for consumption (Harvey, 2010; Bauman, 2011). Making use of land even during the construction phase by creating attractive images shows how developers aim to squeeze value out of every stage of the development process for profit. In this sense, social media plays a key role as a vehicle for showcasing the constant rebranding of real estate images, since it is itself temporary and fluid. Because these images are selective and strategic, social media ends up bringing many of the asymmetric relationships of urban arenas to the digital world (Boy and Uitermark, 2017).

Finally, what began as a curiosity about the constant transformation of construction sites into unconventional art spaces in Berlin uncovered a broader phenomenon of temporary artwashing and uneven equations involving different actors, with only some of them reaping considerable profit. This project shows how artists involved in the A-Fence end up as both agents and victims of gentrification, revealing conflicts amongst themselves that warrant future research. It highlights the importance of cultural-urban theory for understanding pressing urban problems.

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