

11. ExRotaprint (Berlin, Germany)



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Executive summary

[ExRotaprint](#) was founded in 2007 by tenants of the former Rotaprint industrial complex located in Wedding, a traditional working-class district in central Berlin. ExRotaprint set up a legal configuration comprising a heritable building right and non-profit status in order to buy the complex put up for sale by the Berlin Municipality's Real Estate Fund. Established by the tenants ExRotaprint became owner of the 10,000 m² complex and started a non-profit real estate development project setting a precedent in Berlin that inspired many experiments in cooperative ownership and a campaign to change the city's privatisation policy. ExRotaprint offers affordable rents to small businesses, artists and social projects.



Picture 1. There is no profit to be made here. Photo © ExRotaprint

1 Timeline

- 1904 – the Deutsche Maschinenbau- und Vertriebsgesellschaft (German Machinery Manufacturing and Distribution Company) is founded
- 1916 – the company moves its production to Wedding, at Reinickendorfer Straße 46
- 1925 – the company is renamed into Rotaprint
- 1945 – 80% of the production sites are destroyed by air raids
- 1951 – low-rise buildings are constructed on Gottschedstraße
- 1953 – additional parcels inside the block are bought to build new production halls
- 1958 – a modern identity was given to the compound by new, architecturally ambitious structures (by architect Klaus Kirsten)
- 1968 – the company receives an award for its international achievements
- 1980s – the company is in debt
- 1988 – an American investor purchases the Rotaprint AG
- 1989 – Rotaprint goes bankrupt and the complex is transferred over to state ownership
- 1991 – the main parts of the compound are placed under strict historical monument protection
- 1992 – production halls exempted from monument status in the interior of the site are demolished
- 2002 – the property is transferred from the district of Wedding over to Liegenschaftsfonds Berlin (LiFo)
- 2005 August – ExRotaprint Association is founded by tenants
- 2005 October – ExRotaprint makes an unsuccessful bid of 1 euro for the Rotaprint site
- 2006 – a Lidl supermarket is built adjacent to the Rotaprint site
- 2007 July – the non-profit company ExRotaprint gGmbH is founded by tenants
- 2007 September – after successful negotiations by ExRotaprint the site is sold to Stiftung trias and Stiftung Edith Maryon in order to sign a 99-years heritable building right with ExRotaprint

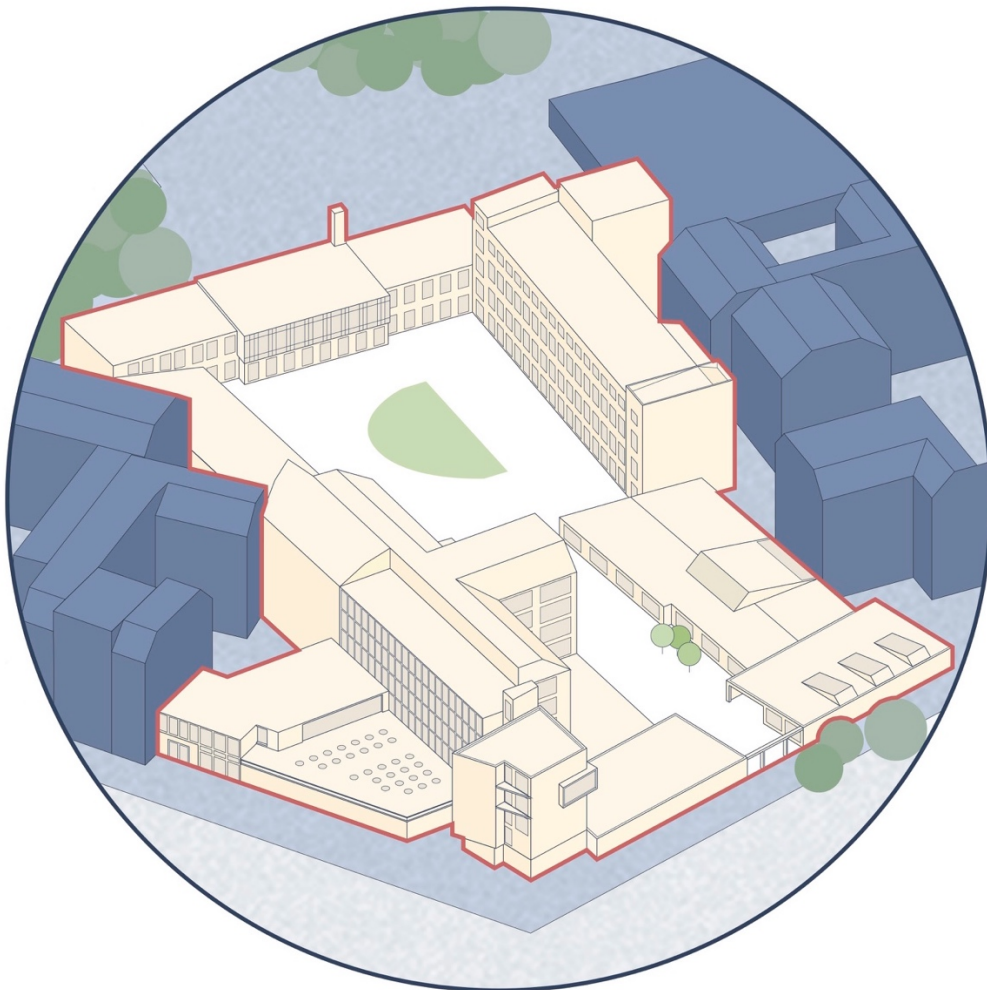
2 The story of the building complex

ExRotaprint is located on the former site of the Rotaprint printing machine manufacturer, a German company that operated in Berlin-Wedding for 80 years

and gave employment to many families in the area. Rotaprint significantly shaped the area and its society: it hired the compound's architect to build its production facilities, later expanded the complex, had some guest apartments in the vicinity, and a workers' holiday home in Berlin-Wannsee. The complex was largely destroyed during the Second World War but it was reconstructed in the post-war years following the design of the architect Klaus Kirsten. The factory produced small printing machines and was very successful until electronic technology began to threaten the small-format offset printer. In 1989 the Rotaprint company went bankrupt. Because of outstanding debts, ownership of the complex was transferred over to the City of Berlin.

Since the 1990s, the Wedding district administration rented the empty spaces of the Rotaprint compound to temporary occupants: small businesses and artists moved in the complex, occupying half of the site. In 2002, the property was transferred to the assets of the Liegenschaftsfonds GmbH (Real Estate Fund), a trustee of the State of Berlin to sell it at the biggest possible price. At the time, the City of Berlin was trying to recover from debt by selling packages of its buildings.

"We felt that the spirit of Rotaprint was still here, this is why we named the compound ExRotaprint. It is also to honour the achievement because we think they left fantastic buildings." Daniela Brahm



Picture 2. The ExRotaprint compound. Image by Jorge Mosquera

3 The policy context

The Rotaprint complex was public property: it belonged to the Berlin state that rented it out for short term uses for artists, manufacturers and other activities, mostly from the neighbourhood. In 2001, the city's real estate policy changed: selling off properties in order to balance the municipal budget became the priority, and the city created a new in-house company, the Liegenschaftsfonds (German for Property Funds), to orchestrate the privatisation process. The activities of the Liegenschaftsfonds, selling out public properties, was seen with an increasing criticism that saw an irreversible damage happening to the city.

The city's policy of prioritising privatisation was rooted in Berlin's banking scandal where Berlin accumulated a large amount of debt: the bailout of the Bankgesellschaft costed the city over 30 billion euros. Therefore, Berlin's policy priority from the mid-1990s on was to keep a balanced budget. On one hand, this fiscal policy had a heavy impact on the city's welfare services: the public budget cuts made a significant pressure on wages in the public sector and reduced the resources of many public facilities like schools, hospitals and kindergartens. This also meant that Berlin was facing a situation that many cities only encountered years later: "The transition to 'austerity urbanism' in Berlin did not have to wait for a global financial crisis." (Bernt et al 2013:17) On the other hand, fiscal austerity also implied a major privatisation campaign: under pressure for balancing its budgets, the public administration had begun to look into ways to discharge the disaffected real estate stock, including housing and facilities, industrial areas and unbuilt land in various parts of the city, through large scale sales, "as a conveniently quick means of reducing deficits and downsizing government within an urban politics framed by crisis." (Beveridge and Naumann 2013:190).

In 2001, the Berlin Senate established the city's Liegenschaftsfonds (German for Real estate Fund), a private company owned by the Land of Berlin, dedicated to sell publicly owned sites and properties that have lost their functions. Like in many cities during times of financial crisis, the privatisation of public assets proved to be an uneven and opaque process, where the "new forms of cooperation occur in an 'institutional void' where rules are mostly hidden from the public" and where "bypassing building and planning laws, these [so-called urban development] contracts allowed for investor-friendly agreements, including the allocation of public subsidies" and have "largely remained unknown to the public." (Dohnke 2013: 262) The government's strategy to sell properties for the highest bid and en bloc gave significant advantages to institutional investors over tenants and cooperatives: large investors could both provide the necessary equity for en bloc purchases and negotiate discount prices for individual units, bought in "packages" (Uffer 2013:157). These advantages also meant that "urban politics and policy-making centred on social equity has increasingly retreated to the background." (Dohnke 2013: 262)

The privatisation process was facilitated by the global financial markets. The stock market crash of 2000 and the growing distrust in the previously favoured IT stocks pushed investors towards the supposedly safe real estate market. In the same time, interest rates were substantially reduced by the central banks who wanted to prevent a recession (Uffer 2013:157). The cheap capital that flooded international markets found an easy way into real estate, and in

particular, into Berlin real estate. This created a new situation in the city: while in the 1990s, investment in Berlin properties was mainly coming from German investment firms, they were joined in the early 2000s by large international firms (Uffer 2013:159). The presence of cheap money prompted investors into real estate development projects that corresponded to no real demand. This speculative real estate boom had a strong impact on the city and its spaces.

4 The initiative

The Rotaprint complex was no exception from the privatisation plan: the buildings were separated from the adjacent wastelands and these latter were put up for sale. The neighbouring parcels were sold to Lidl to open a supermarket. ExRotaprint founders Daniela Brahm and Les Schliesser were alarmed by the neighbourhood's transformation.

"We were up here, and saw this development, which was kind of a warning shot for us. We thought, 'we have better ideas.'" Les Schliesser

The fact that investors at the time were not interested in the Wedding district, a then working-class area, helped the tenants to gain some time. Artists Daniela Brahm and Les Schliesser developed a concept for the complex and approached other tenants with the idea of making the ExRotaprint project together. In 2005 they founded the tenants' association called ExRotaprint e.V. The association allowed the tenants to pursue a concept for the area from the perspective of the tenants, and to begin negotiations with the Liegenschaftsfonds about buying the property. The key challenge for the tenants was to make themselves seen as legitimate partners by the Liegenschaftsfonds.

After the association's first meeting with the Liegenschaftsfonds, the tenants decided to make a symbolic bid of one euro, to be part of the game. ExRotaprint was the only bidder, but the Liegenschaftsfonds did not sell the compound for one euro. The Liegenschaftsfonds calculated a price of 2.4 million euros for the compound, which the association found too high, considering the bad shape of the building. In the following discussions, the Liegenschaftsfonds offered a heritable building right (Erbbaurecht) contract that gave a new direction to the negotiations. In the meanwhile, however, the Liegenschaftsfonds began to arrange a deal with an Icelandic investor who was preparing to buy many public properties in Berlin at once - the Rotaprint compound was part of the package. After the package sale failed in February 2007 and due to political pressure mounted by ExRotaprint with the help of the press, the Liegenschaftsfonds restarted negotiations with the board of ExRotaprint. Knowing that the price of the compound in the package for the islandic investor was - the very low - 600.000 euros, ExRotaprint was able to buy the premises. 600.000 euros for the 10.000 m2 compound was way cheaper than ExRotaprint expected, the spectre of individual profit began to haunt the group again. In order to safeguard the purchase price against speculative gains and to ensure their work on the ExRotaprint project, the group decided to split the ownership of the land and the buildings and negotiated a heritable building right with the trias and Edith Maryon foundations.

ExRotaprint was born from a variety of motivations. First, ExRotaprint members wanted to create **a different idea of ownership** and find a solution for **affordable rent**. Second, they wanted to keep the space open for the people in

Wedding and to contribute to the area by **generating social, economic and cultural capital**. Third, they wanted to **preserve the heritage buildings** of the Rotaprint compound and prevent their sale and future speculation in the area.



Picture 3. ExRotaprint in Berlin. Image by Jorge Mosquera

5 The area

ExRotaprint is located in the former workers' district Wedding. Historically, the river close-by was used to supply water for the area's production facilities and the factories created a polluted environment. With West-Berlin's isolation and city planners' desire to eliminate the industrial past and create a modern city, many of these factories had vanished and with them, many jobs disappeared leaving behind high levels of unemployment.

When two artists, Daniela Brahm and Les Schliesser began to rent a studio space in the Rotaprint complex in 2000, the compound was in the middle of a wasteland, following the demolition of all the adjacent production halls. With little interest from investors, Wedding kept its traditional working-class character longer than many other Berlin districts.

In the following decade, however, with rising prices in Berlin's more central neighbourhoods and the construction of the city's new Hauptbahnhof, Wedding has gradually "moved closer to the centre." The arrival of new, younger populations priced out of former "creative" neighbourhoods brought a process of gentrification to Wedding, with potential conflicts between newcomers and earlier residents, and with rising pressure on housing prices. In order to limit its contribution to gentrification and to resist homogenisation, ExRotaprint's rental policy assures a mix of functions, providing opportunities to a great variety of users.

6 The buildings and their adaptive reuse

**"The architecture was the motor driving us here and giving us energy."
Daniela Brahm**

ExRotaprint is a 10000 m² complex, an ensemble of 11 buildings located in Wedding. Following the destructions of the war, it was partially renovated in the early 1950s: at first Hans Heinze redesigned the existing buildings to appear more modern.

"The architects added larger windows, put white plaster on the façade and elevated the outer wall to make it look like it had a flat roof and not a steep one. These were very small interventions but showed the intentions of the architects." Oliver Clemens

In the second half of the 1950s, the renovated buildings were complemented with new buildings designed in a post-war modernist architecture style by Klaus Kirsten. In 1955-56, Rotaprint's elegant Technical Office is built, with a 185 m² main room surrounded by characteristic glass windows that today serves as an event venue. In 1957-58, another office building was built at the Gottschedstraße and Bornemannstraße corner. The bare concrete "brutalist by accident" Corner Tower is unique in Berlin with its rough concrete surface. The tower remained unfinished: the architect wanted to have two more stories and then a final façade, but it was never completed. In 1957-59, the Carpentry and Training Workshop Building was added to the complex.

"Many people think of heritage buildings being more expensive and holding you back from new ideas, but we never felt it as a restriction, it was an interesting and encouraging aspect for us." Daniela Brahm

With the last act of a retiring heritage protection officer, the ensemble of buildings at Gottschedstraße 4, Bornemannstraße 9-10, and Wiesenstraße 29 became **listed monument in 1991**; the decision infuriated the city administration owning the compound as it prevented it from demolishing the building. The protected buildings became the centre of identity for the area: an important part of the ExRotaprint compound's attractiveness is its unique architectural appearance. The concrete towers had an important role in the artists' choice to start renting a space in the complex first, and to protect the buildings from speculation later. Years later, the tower remains an icon for the ExRotaprint project.



Picture 4. ExRotaprint's concrete tower. Photo (cc) Eutropian

Driven by their curiosity of the ExRotaprint's peculiar architecture, its founders started to research for more information about the buildings. Realising that their architect, Klaus Kirsten is virtually unknown, Daniela Brahm and Les Schliesser began an inquiry into his work and have published a [book](#) on the architect.

When ExRotaprint took over the buildings, they had been neglected for almost 20 years. The former production company, struggling to keep its production running and to avoid bankruptcy, did not invest in its maintenance. The municipality, taking over the building's ownership and ignoring its heritage value, only did rough interventions in the buildings. The buildings did no longer respect current building codes. Some rooftops and the floors were partly covered with vinyl and tiles containing asbestos, the buildings did not match fire protection standards; moreover, they required insulation that would allow preventing energy lost and environmental sustainability. Two types of intervention were immediately required. Firstly, it was important to secure the buildings so they do not deteriorate any longer. Secondly, it was important to clean it from toxic materials and try to adjust the buildings to the current building code and safety regulations.

"The renovation will never stop, there is no point where it's finished. Something a developer wouldn't do. They would put in money, work for a few years and then they would say 'now it's finished for the next 30 years.' But it's different here, it allows you to make more experiments." Oliver Clemens

Most of the renovation work focused on **adapting the building to the needs of the renters**. From the tenants' perspective, the most important thing is to keep

the rents low, so following a strict budget plan was fundamental. Instead of moving out all tenants and have a complete renovation, the idea was to **renovate the building step-by-step**, in a process, keeping 85-90% of the building rented and around 10% under renovation. This process, defined by the limited budget available for the renovation, allowed the organisation to continue generating revenue from the rents to finance a mortgage and to adjust the renovation plans when needed. The renovation has taken over ten years up to now, tenants had to adapt and accept the noise and dirt of a construction site and to accept relocating from room to room when necessary.

“For us it is important to follow the viewpoint of the renters in all development aspects: financially, the weight of the construction work, and the depth of the renovation.” Les Schliesser

The ExRotaprint planning team consisting of Daniela Brahm, Les Schliesser and architects Oliver Clemens and Bernhard Hummel, try to preserve the original architectural features of the complex as much as possible and to avoid to simply replace old elements with new ones. The hardest part of the renovation was finding original materials for the interiors, like ceramic tiles, as well as craftsmen capable of dealing with particular architectural elements, like the concrete façade. For instance, steel frame windows usually are not suitable any longer, and larger companies would have preferred to build them anew; but a small local steel company accepted to install steel windows by hand, fixing the existing frames room by room.

“The design process depends very much on the people who do the work here. You can’t describe the job and then make a tender with 50 bidders and take the cheapest. These are very specific tasks.” Oliver Clemens

The windows have been renovated and walls have been insulated to reduce the heat loss: this change reduced heating costs from 1,80 euros per square metre per month for heating to 1,20 that corresponds to an important saving in ExRotaprint’s budget. Moreover, work has been done to open roof lights, to enlarge some spaces by tearing down the walls of smaller rooms and office spaces were created on the rooftop. Further improvements inside the units were organised mostly by the tenants according to their needs.

“We are aware of the special details, materials, and how valuable they are. We were always looking for a solution for the renovation with much higher protection that is usually done. The municipality is pretty happy with the result because it's more than what they usually get.” Oliver Clemens

7 Activities

As established in its founding documents, ExRotaprint rents spaces for various uses and to a **heterogeneous group of tenants**. One third of the compound’s square meters is dedicated to social projects. For instance, ExRotaprint hosts a variety of language classes, a social outreach organisation which works with unemployed, and a school that works with local teenagers who left school. Another third of the area is dedicated to productive activities, workshops, production companies that create regular jobs. The last third of the compound is used by artists, designers, musicians and other creatives. ExRotaprint did define

this proportion in the heritable building right contract with the foundations trias and Maryon in order to make it obligatory in perpetuity.

“We have this fantastic architecture, a very inspiring place, but we think it should not be for artists and creatives alone. There are designers and unemployed, and there are migrants and craftsmen and small factories; and this comes together in a really heterogeneous picture.” Les Schliesser

Besides accommodating its tenants, ExRotaprint **opens to the neighbourhood and the city** in a variety of ways. Its [canteen](#), situated at the entrance of the compound, offers affordable breakfast, lunch, coffee and cakes, and is frequented by not only tenants of ExRotaprint but also residents from the neighbourhood. The [Glass Box](#), ExRotaprint’s 185 m² Project Room situated at the centre of the compound, welcomes events of various types, with a rental fee dependent on the type and scope of the project.

“We don’t want to be a happy island of the creative class, we want to make something that makes sense here. If you have space you should do something for the people that directly shape the area. We want people to work here, we don’t want representation, we want production here.” Daniela Brahm



Picture 5. A diversity of users in ExRotaprint. Photo (cc) Eutropan

8 Governance

ExRotaprint was initiated by two artists, Les Schliesser and Daniela Brahm, who had been renting space at the former Rotaprint premises since 2000. They were joined by other tenants and created the ExRotaprint e.V. Association in August 2005. The association served as a platform to discuss the long-term perspective and legal structure of the tenants' organisation. Following the decision of the association to establish a non-profit company to take over the site, the ExRotaprint gGmbH was created in July 2017 by seven tenants, two other associates and the association itself: each tenant could decide if they wanted to join the gGmbH as well.

“We accepted that not so many people wanted to participate in the non-profit company. Making participation a duty would have been exclusive: a lot of people that are working here are not interested in being involved in community matters.” Daniela Brahm

A **gemeinnützige GmbH (gGmbH)** is a charitable company with limited liability under German law. The purpose of charitable companies is to benefit the common good: in Germany, many hospitals, kindergartens and museums are managed as charitable companies. gGmbHs combine the benefits of non-profit organisations and for-profit companies and enable organisations to conduct economic activities while pursuing charitable goals. In gGmbHs, profits cannot be distributed among shareholders, but must be redirected towards the company objective. Salaries are connected to work performance. gGmbHs are exempted from certain taxes as long as they comply with charitable law. ExRotaprint's founders chose the gGmbH format to allow economic activities but exclude profit extraction from the organisation.

“We choose a non-profit limited company to exclude the possibility of individual profit and speculation, and to ensure that we will never have the same problem again with the compound being sold.” Les Schliesser

The structure of both the association and the non-profit company imply an **inclusive, participatory decision-making structure**. Even tenants who chose not to be involved in the gGmbH, can be represented through the association's membership in the company. The company partners, including the board of the association, meet once a month. Tenants who are affected by renovation are continuously consulted. The planning team, consisting of founders Daniela Brahm and Les Schliesser as well as the two architects Oliver Clemens and Bernhard Hummel, meets once a week to manage the renovation progress. Decisions on major interventions and the general direction of the company are taken within the gGmbH.

9 Legal instruments

“We realised that in the future when the compound is renovated, its value would increase immensely and we feared the group would fall apart because of individual interests.” Daniela Brahm

From the beginning, the perspective of personal profit or an individual investment return was conceived as a significant threat for the project, potentially damaging for the community and the future use of the compound. In order to avoid the possibility of speculation, ExRotaprint brought in two foundations whose core mission is to prevent speculation with land. According to the arrangement with the anti-speculation foundations, the ground on which the complex is located is owned by Stiftung trias and Stiftung Edith Maryon and the buildings are owned by the ExRotaprint gGmbH. As a result of this split ownership, none of the owners can sell the buildings and make a profit out of the changing value of the complex; therefore, speculation with the buildings is legally excluded from the owners' choices.

“It was important for us to show that a new and different way to deal with property is possible and to make sure that the people who make up the district can continue to use the space.” Les Schliesser

Heritable building right (Erbbaurecht) is a form of long-term lease established in Germany more than 100 years ago to lease land to cooperatives building affordable housing or to enable poor families to build a house. This instrument allows tenants to pay an annual interest or lease fee instead of buying the land with an initial capital. In the case of ExRotaprint, the gGmbH pays the land lease fee to the foundations trias and Maryon. The long-term lease enables tenants to invest significantly in the site, building new structures or renovating old ones, therefore in practice it equals to ownership rights, except for the right of selling the properties. In fact, heritable building right is frequently used today to keep land in public ownership but encourage tenants to invest in the properties, or to keep land out of the speculation market. The heritable building right contract also includes restrictions for the use of the properties, thus creating a mandatory framework for the future.

“We wrote down in our preamble that we rent out to work, art and community in equal parts, it's in our heritable building right, so also future generations also have to fulfil it. The contracts build the framework for the future. We can do anything within this framework, and there are so many possibilities, but we are non-profit.” Daniela Brahm

Both the German Stiftung trias and the Swiss Stiftung Edith Maryon are engaged in taking land off the market in a way that it cannot be sold again. It also includes “liberating” the land by gradually freeing it from debt. The foundations usually work with heritable building right (Erbbaurecht) contracts of 99 years, allowing them to prevent the sale of the land or radical changes in the land use, but enabling their partners to develop long-term projects on the land, corresponding to the initially agreed, socially and environmentally responsible goals. The barrier these foundations represented to selling the compound and making profit from it was exactly the kind of limitation the ExRotaprint members

were looking for. Establishing a heritable building right contract with the foundations was considered as a good tool to avoid future speculation and the possibility of individual profit.

“With this construction the ground is separated from the buildings. The ground is now owned by the foundations and we own the buildings. So we can decide everything, what ExRotaprint should be, how we finance the renovation of the buildings, and we decide who should rent there and we put up the whole thing. We are in an ownership-similar situation. But the only thing we can never do, we can never sell ExRotaprint to anybody.” Les Schliesser

Stiftung trias is a foundation that helps community groups and co-housing projects access financing and move properties out of the speculation market. Engaged in disseminating knowledge about non-profit real estate development, trias collects and shares knowledge about co-housing projects and supports initiatives with relevant literature, network and financial resources. To receive financing from trias, initiatives undergo a 6-months-to-2-years process through which trias examines the liability of the initiatives. A non-profit-orientated profile is key to work with trias, moreover, the foundation evaluates the proposed initiatives, their goals, their members and organisational structure, and it checks their economic sustainability. Trias invests personnel capacity in the initiatives they collaborate with: they can join them in crucial situations, like meetings with the municipality or the mayor, with banks, help them with their financing sheet, help to find their legal form and to define their financial instruments. Moreover, trias looks at the evolution of their finances and if possible, it can adjust its land lease fee to make their first years easier for the initiatives. They also expect support from the initiatives once they have stabilized their projects. Trias ensures that over the years, the initiatives preserve their core goals and it that they keep functions agreed on in the contract, yet trias does not give directives to the management of single initiatives nor it influences its renovation, rental charges, and activities.

“When we buy properties, our goal is to secure spaces of freedom. Prices are getting higher, international capital looks for good investments and finds it in real estate.” Rolf Novy-Huy

10 Financial resources

When ExRotaprint began to negotiate with Stiftung trias, the foundation was still very small: it could not afford the 600.000 euros purchase price. They brought in the Maryon Foundation, disposing of a larger capital, and together they bought the compound for 600.000 euros which was even back in 2007 less than the standard land price. According to the agreement, ExRotaprint pays a yearly 5.5% interest rate of the purchase price, a sum that does not threaten the existence of the project but which creates a revenue for the foundations that they can later reinvest in other initiatives that are preparing to purchase their land. In the final setup, secured for decades, the foundations own the land and ExRotaprint owns the buildings.

“For us it was interesting because it’s a kind of circulating money. We pay money back to foundations that have no other goal than to prevent real estate speculation at other places again, so they make money with the existing heritable building right contracts to work further.” Daniela Brahm

Solidarity fund: The organisations that work with Stiftung trias agree on paying a land lease fee of 4%, which often appears less preferable than a bank mortgage, as it is a lifelong security-contract with the foundation. In reality, these fees constitute a solidarity fund. Trias invests the revenues and the donations received by private donors in other similar initiatives and the purchase of land, and it works as a watchdog over the initiatives, regularly controlling that they remain faithful to their original ideal. The organisations who decided to collaborate with trias do so because of their interest in supporting a fund which advocates for non-profit land use.

“To work with us is an act of solidarity: after 30 years when they repaid all their bank loans and don’t have any debts anymore, they continue paying the land lease fee into a solidarity fund.” Rolf Novy-Huy

Besides paying the yearly rate to the foundations, ExRotaprint is also responsible for the gradual **renovation** of the buildings, a much more significant cost. In order to manage this, ExRotaprint took a mortgage of 2.3 million euros (with 4% interest) in 2009, to cover the total renovation costs estimated to reach 3.2-3.3 million euros, the rest of which is to be paid from the compound’s revenues. The mortgage was also taken from a very specific financial actor, a Swiss pension trust called [CoOpera Sammelstiftung PUK](#), specialised on sustainable real estate projects with a strong local social or cultural dimension. With rules prohibiting it from putting their money on the stock market, CoOpera has to work with existing projects.

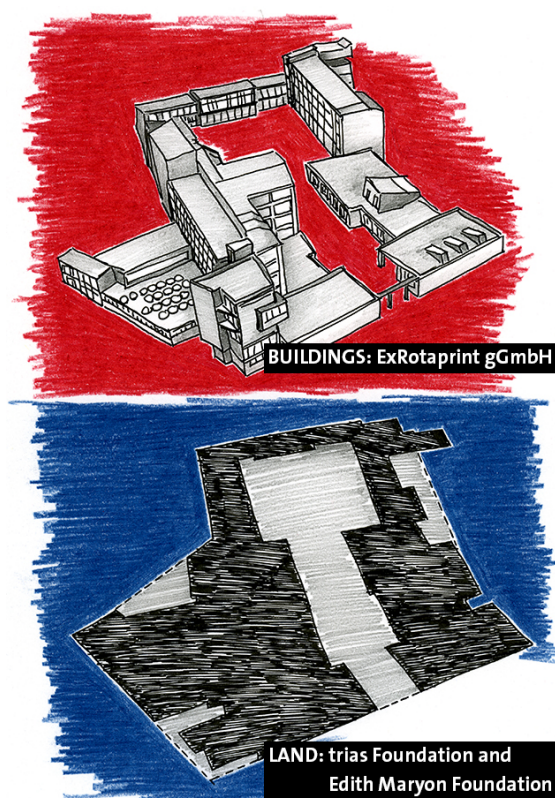
“For a normal bank we would have been a high-risk project. CoOpera met us and said ‘For us meeting you and seeing your will to get this project through is the greatest guarantee.’ Besides this, we had a reliable economic calculation, with a different approach than other banks.” Les Schliesser

In 2017, ExRotaprint received 500,000 euros grant from the [Berlin LOTTO Foundation](#) for the renovation. To cover the renovation costs beyond the loan and the grant, the surplus from the rental income is always reinvested into the renovations. As of 2019, ExRotaprint has spent around 4.2 million euros for the restoration and maintenance of the compound.

Our role as an architect is much wider than usually. It’s all about money and we have a very tight corridor, we have very little money and we can’t just start something and say ‘well, let’s look how much it costs’; we have to be sure we can solve it with the money we have.” Oliver Clemens

ExRotaprint’s revenue relies completely on the income from rents. In the past years, its annual rental income totals 370,000 euros per year. According to the heritable building right contract ExRotaprint pays an annual ground rent equal to 10% of net rental income or a minimum of at least 5.5% of the initial land value. ExRotaprint’s unique organisational structure and financial model allows it to operate almost completely independently from the real estate market, but not without significant pressure from the mortgage payments: all rates and conditions

have to be fulfilled. On the other hand, nobody in the organisation receives a personal investment return but everyone shares the benefit of an affordable rent and autonomy in the decision making. Without pressing financial burdens, ExRotaprint can accommodate a real diversity of tenants, faithful to its original mission.



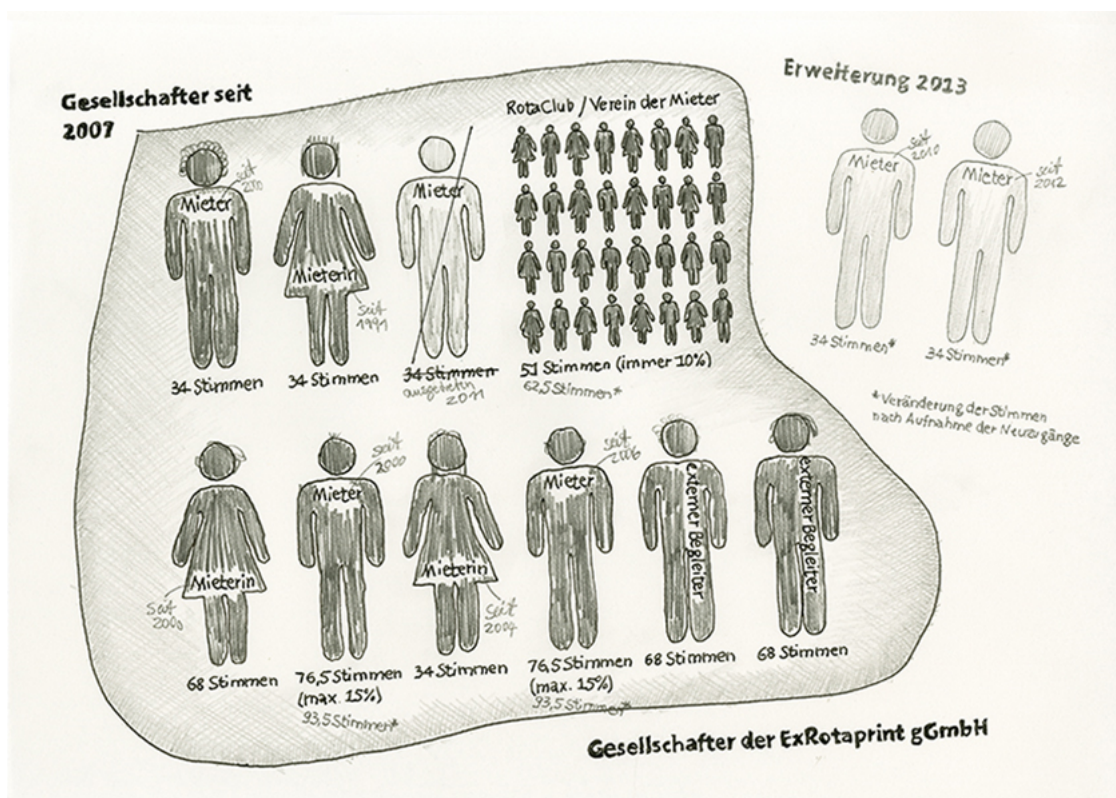
Picture 6. The separated ownership of land and buildings. Image © ExRotaprint

11 Community involvement

Since the beginning of the development of ExRotaprint, community involvement has had an important role. The first step in gathering support to protect the complex from being sold to investors was to **involve tenants** on the compound and build a tenants' association. At the time of this mobilisation, tenants did not know one another, despite working within the same buildings. Daniela Brahm and Les Schliesser began to approach the various tenants, documenting their use of the compound's spaces. They took photographs of the spaces and made interviews with tenants to discover the value of their investments and to explore their activities. This research resulted in a document where the desire of preserving and expanding this local structure was expressed.

From its foundation, ExRotaprint was strongly engaged with its neighbourhood and the broader Wedding district. The way ExRotaprint's rental policy was designed reflects a strong commitment to work with local communities, provide spaces, services and workplaces for local residents. Through a variety of social activities, community outreach projects, the canteen and events, ExRotaprint has been communicating intensely with people living in the neighbourhood. Inspired by ExRotaprint's success in moving a 10,000 post-industrial complex out of the real

estate market, an entire community was born to advocate for alternative approaches to real estate and city development.



Picture 7. The organisational scheme of ExRotaprint. Image © ExRotaprint

12 Impact

One of the main impacts of ExRotaprint is to provide **affordable working spaces** among rising prices all across Berlin. This affordability is enabled by the low land lease fees paid to the foundations trias and Maryon, due to the low purchasing price of the complex in 2007. Real estate prices have literally increased tenfold in the area in the past 12 years and this transformation highlights the importance of ExRotaprint's financial stability.

"The goal is to have low rents, in Berlin rents are rising immensely. In this respect Berlin is normalising, it's becoming a normal capital."
Daniela Brahm

The rent prices in ExRotaprint are between 3-5.4 euros per m². While rents in the compound were at an average level at the time of the purchase of the site, today they are considered very low, compared to other spaces in the area of other neighbourhoods of Berlin. With rising rents and profits made from real estate development across Berlin, many of the tenants would not necessarily have another choice of location. ExRotaprint has played an active role in offering new opportunities for those who are usually the victims of gentrification: besides accommodating affordable work spaces for companies that would need to move outside the city otherwise, it became an open area also creatives, artists, drop-out teenagers, immigrants, refugees, newcomers and the unemployed.

The compound's **diversity** corresponds to its rental policy: instead of following a regular investor's logic, the calculation of the renovation costs, for instance, is based on the tenants' needs. Diversity can only be maintained if expenses are kept low, and there is no profit made on the owners' side.

"There is a lot of social capital, a lot of possibilities created here, but no profit on the owners' side but on the users' side." Les Schliesser

With its successful model, ExRotaprint has gained influence both in the neighbourhood and in the city. The organisation's engagement helped a series of initiatives gain access to shared ownership of buildings with the help of heritable building right contracts. Even corporate neighbours like the Lidl adjacent to the ExRotaprint site agreed to cooperate about the future development of the block.

"With this project you have the credibility to ask for more influence. We do something here which is unique, we offer space for workshops, people are working here, just consider the situation not only from the profit point of view." Daniela Brahm

At the city level, ExRotaprint's strategy to oppose investor-led privatisation and create a community-driven civic space has proven highly inspiring for many initiatives across the city and beyond as they were facing similar threats from the side of the city's real estate policy and large institutional investors and developers.

"We can show how it works to take speculation out of the real estate sector. We have renovated the buildings and the rent is still low, which nobody believes. Most people think there is some kind of subsidy but there is not, simply the rent pays the credit." Les Schliesser

Inspired by the ExRotaprint and other initiatives, in the early 2010s many initiatives recognised this impact and began to mobilise the public opinion against privatisation, or in certain cases, for more controlled privatisation. While the community-led purchase of the ExRotaprint compound was a key factor in revealing the possibilities of alternative finance, many people were simply alarmed by the lack of transparency in the privatisation process.

"In the last decade, Berlin progressively stopped having easy accessibility of space with low rents and land prices have raised quickly. We interfere on different levels politically to spread our ideas of an open city with chances for all inhabitants." Daniela Brahm

One of the key forums of this discussion was the initiative [Stadt Neudenken](#). Stadt Neudenken was founded in 2011 in order to channel the voices of citizen initiatives and founders of civic spaces into a **public discussion about the Berlin's real estate policy**. Grounding the initiative was motivated by the lack of participation in issues of public real estate management.

Stadt Neudenken in 2012 managed to establish a roundtable on real estate policy in Berlin organised once in every three months, bringing together actors with very different positions, from representatives of civic society and the cultural fields to politicians and administration. The goal of the meetings was to shape the city's new real estate policy and a sort of a real estate board or panel, that could be a body consisting of stakeholders from civil society that possesses the expertise and perhaps even indicate the spectrum of different existing interests in real estate properties. The main focus of the roundtable was to

develop an alternative to the regular privatisation process where the highest bid wins the tender.

Based on these considerations, on November 3, 2011, the Stadt Neudenken initiative issued a position paper and founding manifesto. The manifesto, calling for an immediate moratorium on public property sales, also created a list of recommendations for property management. In the same period, the City Council had also been working on its Neue Liegenschaftspolitik, following the approval of its need by the city council in 2010 and the governing coalition in 2011. While Ulrich Nussbaum, the city's financial senator, who was under pressure because of the unpopularity of the privatisation process, quit his office within a few weeks after the publication of Stadt Neudenken's manifesto, he also came up with the idea of a "Neue Liegenschaftspolitik" as his last move before departure.

In the core of the new Real Estate Policy proposed by Stadt Neudenken was a different set of criteria for privatisation processes: a "concept method" that gave priority to the "best concept" instead of the highest bid. The first, informal concept-based process was organised at the Blumengrossmarkt, an area that was originally the starting point for the founding of Initiative Stadt Neudenken. The experience of ExRotaprint and the initiatives it inspired has altered the discussion about potential development schemes in Berlin. With the emergence of a city-wide discourse on real estate policies and with events like the [Experimentdays](#), notions of community ownership and non-speculative real estate development have gained significant influence across Europe and beyond.

13 Interviewees

Daniela Brahm, co-founder of ExRotaprint

Oliver Clemens, architect of the ExRotaprint complex

Rolf Novy-Huy, Stiftung trias

Les Schliesser, co-founder of ExRotaprint

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