

Gentrification, social action and “role-playing”: Experiences garnered on the outskirts of Hamburg

Peter Birke, Florian Hohenstatt, Moritz Rinn

This article reflects experiences of a working group against gentrification in Hamburg-Wilhelmsburg, which is a district in the midst of the harbour inhabited by poor, migrant and working class people. Since the early 2000s, in the verge of the transnational tendencies of „revitalisation” of waterfronts, Wilhelmsburg was specifically targeted by local politicians to better its public image and attract investors and new middleclass inhabitants. Vehicle of these transformations were two big exhibitions, taking part in the district in 2013, but announced almost ten years earlier, followed by encompassing and partly successful measures to valorise real estate and privatise public space: e.g. the International Building Exhibition (IBA) and the International Gardening Exhibition (igs). The Working Group on the Restructuring of Wilhelmsburg (Arbeitskreis Umstrukturierung Wilhelmsburg) was founded when the results of the valorisation began to gain momentum: massive rent increases, reduction and „enclosure” of public space, and intensified social segregation. In order to oppose those tendencies and as part of the Hamburg-wide „Right to the City”-network, the group experimented with a wide range of actions: participation in protests against rising rents, street theatre and performances, initiatives against the instrumentalisation of artists and district culture by IBA and igs, as well the evaluation of the process by means of critical sociological research. Beyond the multiplicity of these variety of action forms the group was searching for alternatives against the intense process of gentrification in the community. The article shows that, although the protest movement gained a lot of public attention, this question is still unanswered.

Key words: gentrification, social action, urban social movements, poor peoples movements, right to the city