Threats and hopes for abandoned buildings in Berlin: an urban exploration approach

Amenazas y esperanzas para los edificios abandonados de Berlín: Una aproximación desde la exploración urbana

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Abstract. Abandoned buildings have become a distinguishing mark for the recent history and alternative spirit of Berlin. The growth in popularity of urban exploration, which focuses in illegally trespassing these neglected places, has made Berlin a hotspot for such a subculture, whose practitioners express an extreme sensibility about the current and future state of the buildings they explore. Through this perspective, the present article identifies three main threats towards the buildings: a touristification phenomenon created by urban exploration; commodification as a result of this touristification; and the increasing gentrification in the city that ignores the tangible and intangible qualities of the buildings. By critically reviewing these aspects, the article concludes proposing 'informal re-appropriation' as an integrated solution that prioritizes public participation and slow urban development over neoliberal immediate revenues, where minimal interventions contribute to preserve Berlin's unique aesthetics embedded in its abandoned buildings.

Resumen. Los edificios abandonados se han convertido en una seña de identidad de la reciente historia y el espíritu alternativo de Berlín. La creciente popularidad de la exploración urbana, que se centra en adentrarse ilegalmente en estos espacios, ha hecho de Berlín un núcleo importante de dicha subcultura, cuyos miembros poseen una tremenda sensibilidad por el estado presente y futuro de los edificios que exploran. A través de este enfoque, el artículo identifica tres amenazas que se ciernen sobre los edificios: turistificación creada por la propia exploración urbana; comodificación como resultado de dicha turistificación; y la progresiva gentrificación de una ciudad que ignora las cualidades tangibles e intangibles de sus edificios. Tras una lectura crítica de estos aspectos, el artículo termina proponiendo la 'reapropiación informal' como solución integradora que prioriza la participación pública y un desarrollo urbano más lento frente a los beneficios económicos inmediatos que garantiza el neoliberalismo, donde las intervenciones mínimas contribuyan a preservar la particularidad estética de Berlín enraizada en sus edificios abandonados.

Introduction and methods

Due to the political, social and economic changes that Berlin experimented in its recent history, a large amount of abandoned buildings punctuate the city still today (Colomb, 2012). Their lack of function and peculiar decayed aesthetics contributed to forge the subcultural and 'trashy' image of Berlin, which is unique among the rest of European capitals (Girot, 2004; Sheridan, 2007; Untiks, 2012). In this sense, the subculture of urban exploration puts its major focus on illegally trespassing abandoned buildings with the purpose of rendering them visible while denouncing the limited availability of public space (Garrett, 2013). Urban exploration then opens new debates in terms of current state of conservation, prospective uses, and the relation of these buildings with the on-going development in our cities. Being extendable to the rest of the society, this article investigates the main urban concerns expressed by Berlin-based explorers, adding new perspectives coming from a transgressive community which is increasingly being considered in Urban Studies.

Apart of using an interdisciplinary theoretical background applied to Urban Studies, the methods used in this research are mostly empirical. Fieldwork consisted in trespassing over 20 abandoned buildings in Berlin during a four-month period dating from April to July 2014. During this time, I collected fieldnotes that serve as a first-hand testimony. In addition to this, I interviewed the well-known urban explorer

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