



Hauptbahnhof, the non-Kiez

Berlin resident Giulia Pines reflects on the strangeness of living in a neighbourhood that's not quite a neighbourhood...

Images by Paul Sullivan

How does one write about a neighborhood that is not a neighbourhood? A neighbourhood still so much under construction one cannot even use that well-worn phrase 'not so much a neighbourhood as a state of mind' ('not of an age but for all time?') to describe it?



A neighbourhood whose future identity is still so much in question, we are awoken day and night by the rasping, wrenching sounds of the neighborhood trying to 'find itself,' sounds that claw their way through our window like a pre-teenage panther with no friends in school?

When I give my address to curious new friends I inevitably describe my location as 'right above Hauptbahnhof,' as if we were somehow hovering directly above the mammoth station, perhaps the dejected spirit of a house that had been razed to make way for its tunnels and tubes, looking down at one of the main architectural ambassadors of the new Berlin, perplexed.

They seem puzzled by my description since they know nothing really exists there yet. Then I have to explain that I do indeed live in no man's land; that we are neither Mitte, nor Wedding, nor Tiergarten, nor Moabit, and often wonder what our *Kiez* will be called upon completion – WeMiTiMo? – and indeed, whether it will even resemble one.

I remember the first time I ever came here; it was to buy train tickets to Munich two years ago. My friend and I, emerging from one of the two main entrances with no idea whether we were facing North or South (no one, including me, can ever remember on which side of the station Europaplatz and Washingtonplatz are located), picked a direction and started walking in it.

We got lost, and the experience left an imprint on my mind-map with a permanently grey sheen over it. Hauptbahnhof was a place existing out of space and time, a slothful, gargantuan creature of glass and steel nourished by feeding tubes – its many train tracks – plopped sloppily in the middle of Berlin's sand-and-weed flatlands and happily consuming all that lay around it. Once or twice my boyfriend has referred to it playfully as '*mein kleines Hauptbahnhöfchen*,' but of course the diminutive ending only adds to the ludicrousness of just how big it is.

What's more, this neighborhood holds an even more special status for me as the place where he lived when I met him, and where we first walked together in the cool September air over a year ago as we got to know each other. Each part of it is imbued with a memory, and now, sadly, those memories are too often barren fields of trees uprooted and sand smoothed over and molded in preparation for the foundations of some new building to be laid.

Where we winter-walked in January and saw two foxes chasing each other in the evening lights of the city is now a construction site boarded off and only visible as the S-bahn glides East towards the station from Bellevue, the next one over.

The empty lot North of the station that allows us a view of the TV tower (one of my criteria for the perfect Berlin apartment practically as soon as I had moved here) is now the loudest of all construction sites which rattles us out of our dreams and seems to force the quietness of the atoms within our brains to stir to the point of explosion and finally, last weekend, forced us to overturn our domestic peace by moving the bed into the living room just so we could shut one extra door at night.

But like all neighbourhoods, even those without acronyms, Hauptbahnhof (we'll call this the area as well as the station) begins to take on a personality the longer you live there and the more you rise to the challenge of looking for one. There are things that catch my eye every morning as I make the short walk from the



house to the station, and people of course. The trees and flowers go through seasons, and so do the people.

There is always an old man who walks reasonably well with two crutches and must also live in the neighborhood, who greets me with a '*buongiorno signorina!*' whenever he sees me, even though I don't think he is Italian. I usually reply with a '*buongiorno signore*' in response, and I remember feeling quite happy with the whole exchange the first time it happened, which was right after I had experienced the never-ending onslaught of male attention in Madrid.

It was simply nice to know that one gentleman still knew how to talk to a lady as if she were in fact a lady. Due to the location of a church mission practically at the end of our street and a very attractive park right in front of us, there is always somewhat of an excess of homeless people surrounding us. Last year, right around the time we met, there was Paul, who had lived under a tree for many months before knocking on the door and asking for a place to sleep.

This summer there was a very tall, forlorn, shaggy, but gentle looking man who sat on the bench along the pathway every morning catching some sun. I never spoke to him, but I always saw him, and sometimes wondered if he ever wondered, as I did about him, about me. Right across the narrow, partially paved path that is our driveway is a whole microcosm of the city—the semi-socialist community gardens that exist all over Berlin, Dacha-like and each with its own collection of social and political systems, the *Kleingartenkolonien*. We know the comings and goings of each garden tenant like we know those of our neighbors.



We know the man who is the unofficial mayor of the colony, who actually used to live in one of the houses that we live in, with long hair and a motorcycle he roars in on, who looks a bit tough but then proceeds to cut flowers and vines the whole day.

We know the couple whose garden sits directly across from ours, who have a cherry tree that gives the most amazing fruit, but never ever pick any of it, leaving it all for the no-doubt overjoyed birds, and for us, the ones on the small branches outside their gate that we can reach without looking too conspicuous.

The vines that cover our wall, first barren and then green, are in fall the most brilliant reds and oranges and purples, the walkway from our house to the station sprinkled with walnut shells from the surrounding trees, which the crows, our neighbors too, in their genius carry over to the roadside so that the cars can roll over them, smashing them and hence freeing the fruit inside.

There is the man who is building an outdoor sauna in his little garden, and the crazy guy who took all the Christmas trees last January and burned them, who is

convinced I'm French because I have an accent when I speak German. Then finally there is our little world within a world: the house we live in, the two of us sandwiched between an American who is a friend of ours, and a German schoolteacher who looks askance at practically everything we do.

The path leading to the house is a bit frightening on dark nights when there is no moon, but then simply enchanting on the nights when the moon lights the way, or when the clouds above are so dense that they reflect all the lights from Hauptbahnhof, and you can see where to go as clearly as those two January foxes we once saw and will never see again.