

UFERHALLEN

ARTISTS DESIGNED STOCKS TO CO-OWN THEIR MULTI-USES
CULTURAL COMPOUND, PREVENTING THEIR EVICTION

In 2008, during another wave of mass privatization of public realty in Berlin, the city of Berlin sold a 18.000 m² heritage-protected streetcar workshop in Wedding for 6 million euros to the Uferhallen AG, controlled by the investors Hans-Martin Schmidt and Friedrich Orth. Today, over 100 people work on 8000 square meters in artist and rehearsal studios, artistic workshops, and exhibition and concert spaces. *"In miniature, we represent the city-wide artistic production and also its threats"*, says artist Heiner Franzen.

In order to save the property from speculation and to secure user's control over their work spaces, founder Hans-Martin Schmidt came up with an exemplary model from which there's a lot to learn, especially from its flawed realisation: In 2011, artists designed 3100 works to serve as stocks. With these artist shares, ownership of the Uferhallen was meant to be spread among the tenants and across the whole city.

Yet, in the end, big chunks of stock ended up in the hands of people with investment interest, with 95 percent controlled by the former majority shareholders (Schmidt had meanwhile left). In 2017 the compound was sold for 27 million euros, together with three more properties, to Alexander Samwer, founder of tech investment company Rocket Internet, famous for founding Zalando, among others. In 2016, the tenants had organised in the union Uferhallen e.V. and urged the city of Berlin to also bid. The then-new culture senator Klaus Lederer rejected to pay more than the market value, which the district of Wedding saw at 10-12 million.

Samwer's first drafts envisioned two residential towers. His company pressed artists into selling their shares (having risen from 1500 to 8000 euros in value). In exchange for a three year lease extension. They helped themselves - and the city - by selling the shares to the city of Berlin instead, as artworks acquired for the collection of the city-funded Neuer Berliner Kunstverein. With that trick, they made Berlin a minority shareholder. A very small minority indeed, but one with high symbolic value. *"We do sense a bigger support since then"*, says Heiner Franzen. The district of Wedding has used their leverage by restricting the use of the compound to cultural causes, shedding all plans for residential exploitation. Recent building drafts have been rejected by heritage protection.

The new majority owners will go ahead with refurbishments, and the resulting rent increase is not dealt out. But the tenants have been assured they can stay. The senate has learned its share and has since vehemently worked towards protecting artistic work space (see conversation on this page). *"We set an example for how the city should deal with artist studios in the future"*, says Heiner Franzen, who, in the face of artists of all income groups afraid of losing their working basis, still sees a strip of light on the horizon: *"At least, Berlin still has a tiny toe in the door, in contrast to cities like London or Amsterdam."* **Kolja Reichert**

<http://uferhallen-ev.de>