“Why do young people always turn to the Internet when they want to show something?”
“Young people need to be encouraged to create art themselves and not just to reproduce things”
“Why is the classroom the main place where lessons take place – who decided that?”
“More community life on the streets! (…) interactive things, more participation!”
“More places where young people can easily exhibit their own self-created things.”
(Statements from peer-to-peer interviews, Kulturprojekte 2010)

Summary
The following paper presents “The Young Tenants”, a project started by Berlin based Internationales JugendKunst- und Kulturhaus Schlesische27 that gives adolescents and young adults the opportunity for an artistic and cultural usage of vacant spaces in different districts of Berlin. Looking at the increasing disappearance of public spaces, the project encourages community-oriented engagement and allows youngsters to discover their artistic creativity and craftsmanship in a protected space, but at the same time to be confronted with the reality of the public space. Away from institutionally organized features of school (formal learning) and out-of-school education (non-formal learning), this approach highlights otherwise rather casual and implicitly occurring processes of informal learning, giving them visibility and a temporary location. In view of the self-organization of these tenant rooms and on the basis of current discussions about local educational landscapes, the project creates not only independent spaces that emphasize informal learning but establishes self-determined learning environments in the cultural urban field.
1. The Kick-off

When asked about their understanding of culture and their interest in art and cultural events in the city, over 300 youngsters from Berlin affirmed in a peer-to-peer survey (Kulturprojekte 2010) that there is a shortage of public spaces and complained that (aside from the streets, vacant lots or shopping malls) the only uncomplicated and easily accessible space is the Internet.

The so-called Young Council (Junger Rat) which was founded by the young interviewers in response to this situation organised a ‘youth conference’ which, with the assistance of the Action Research method, set itself the goal of increasing youth participation in the area of art and culture. With its call for self-determined and self-managed spaces, the Young Council sees itself as soon becoming a much sought-after mediator between youth, cultural institutions and politics. Work groups discuss why young people hardly attach any cultural value, let alone artistic character to their own activities. For many art has negative associations, such as old paintings, dusty museums, long-winded theatre, boring concerts, dry lectures – something for posh snobs and art-zealous middle-class bores, all too often advertised in a ‘professionally formulated youth language’. Young people have to rely on virtual spaces and digital networks, whose attractiveness is measured in their potential visibility and in free, readily available access. In light of the surplus and short-lived nature, this is simultaneously associated with the pressure of having to be constantly up to date in order to attract attention and the impossibility of offering deeper face-to-face discussions and meaningful exchange. Young people also want analogue ways of communicating – a local alternative to the World Wide Web which enables them to leave the virtual world and get onto the real world stage. The goals stated at the conference included the desire to self-manage and accept personal responsibility for self-operated spaces which will provide scope for young people to pursue their own artistic and cultural activities and generate public attention.
Following this youth conference, the Schlesische27 reacted to this obvious need for open, unstructured and currently unoccupied spaces. The project ‘Young Tenants’ (Junge Pächter) focuses on the creative self-organisation of young people and seeks to close the gap that was articulated over the course of the Action Research process. With this project, teenagers and young adults will be given a deserted shop, empty pub or similar premises for a limited period of time together with a small budget for a self-conceived artistic/cultural programme for performance and using the space. The project aims to create small, public, club-like event formats for friends, neighbourhoods and other teams of tenants. It also aims to give young people the opportunity to try out being promoters and hosts, to create programmes or projects and to advertise them. The young people will be given responsibility for bringing their rented spaces to life and giving them a profile. It is also expected that they establish house rules and set up a finance plan.

To provide assistance with these endeavours, the Schlesische27 team has gained the support of employees from various art and cultural institutions in Berlin who will advise the young people as mentors whenever required. These include Schossplatz Theater Köpenick, the Arsenal Institut für Film- und Videokunst, the Neuköllner Oper, the JugendTheaterWerkstatt Spandau, the dance workshop DOCK 11 EDEN**** and Schlesische27 itself. Outside of the actual spaces and education programmes, they will provide advice on the technical, organisational and artistic levels. This will also give the young people insights into professional working conditions and cultural, artistic and event-related career profiles. The mentors will not intervene in the processes and will assist only when asked.

In preparation for the project, ‘culture scouts’ travel around the various city districts of Berlin to draw attention to the project and to ask youngsters about their spatial needs. The project is launched in September 2011 with a ‘Projektschmiede’ (Project Forge) in which approximately eighty interested young
people from all over Berlin and from different social backgrounds get together for an ideas workshop at Schlesische27. Successful cultural pilot projects and artistic initiatives (such as the Prinzessinnengärten, Raumlabor Berlin, Gartenstudio, Mellowpark and Kolonie Wedding) introduce their projects and offer the young people an inspiring range of ideas as well as a forum for mutual exchange. In addition to short presentations about content-related aspects, they are given insights into organisational and technical issues (such as conflict management, legal issues, budgeting, public relations and the intermediate use of urban spaces).

In creative workshops the tenant groups create their ‘Heißschmiedepläne’ (hot forge plans). Utilisation concepts are envisaged, the first working steps are agreed and imaginative names are found for the six tenancy spaces located in the Berlin districts of Köpenick, Wedding, Pankow, Kreuzberg, Spandau und Neukölln. Using chalk drawings, cardboard, string and similar materials, models for the proposed uses are built on table-sized wooden panels that have been painted black. The first ideas become visible and different visions begin to take shape.

On the floor of the so-called Red Hall at Schlesische27, outlines for the six tenancy locations are drawn in chalk, simultaneously representing the six different city districts where the project will be realised. The marked areas indicate one or two items of furniture, such as a chair and a lamp, a bar or a stage situation – objects which symbolise the possible use of the space. This gives the young tenants the opportunity to ‘provisionally’ move in to their future premises and to have a go at furnishing their rooms using a great deal of imagination.

Having rented suitable vacant properties and obtained the keys, the tenants begin the renovation and design work, which in some cases is very elaborate. A ‘furniture bazaar’ at Schlesische27 provides them with their first items of furniture. Other necessary items are borrowed (for example from their mentors) or obtained free of charge. For a few furnishing and design ideas, support is found from sponsors. The
three utilisation phases that were planned for the first cycle of the project (October 2011 – June 2012) are modified slightly so that groups with different concepts work in parallel instead of consecutively. In most spaces the tenants are able to begin using the rooms in December 2011. In addition to the programmes offered by schools and non-school educational institutions, the tenants open educational spaces in the entirely literal sense. The young people sharpen their perceptions and train their creative abilities, or as the ancient Greeks would put it, their aesthetic and poietic abilities. They create groups, form opinions, negotiate their ideas, learn from the professional expertise of their mentors, design interior spaces and fill them – with handicraft or service-oriented projects, performance, theatre or musical events, with temporary explorations of the art of living including photographic documentation. Networking between the programmes in all of the tenancy spaces also generates contact between different communities and youth cultures, friends and neighbourhood residents who are encouraged to participate in the creative projects which are being offered – leading to what might be called “communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger 1999). Realising these projects enables an increasing level of professionalisation, mirroring the challenges of daily life in a way that is far closer to reality than would ever occur in the typical school context.

PHOTO 5 – Moving to Kreuzberg: first attempts. Temporary floor maps in the ‘Red Hall’ of Schlesische27

2. The Tenant Rooms

Snapshot // ‘Dorfplatz unter Tage’ (Village square below ground)
Neukölln // The journey alone is a small adventure. Small, handwritten signs point the way through the meandering grounds of the former brewery. They lead via a staircase and a dimly lit hall, which seemingly disappears into the catacombs of this old industrial facility. On the left a door opens to a theatre space with old carpets, a hotchpotch of chairs, a stage, a lighting control desk and a bar. Someone is rehearsing. Two corridors further is a large room featuring a sweeping window frontage on account of
the building’s hillside location. Daylight! On a podium in the middle is a self-built kitchen and reclaimed sofas – it is the meeting place for the young project team of a small association who have set themselves up in the adjoining rooms, studios and work spaces. It is also a place of negotiation for the young tenants who have only just recently moved in to one of the rooms. Ten tenants are rehearsing Gertrude Stein’s ‘Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights’. In a Dadaistic manner, fragments are assembled from an old story into a play about the difficulty, indeed futility, of communication. “It is also a contribution to the network of young tenants,” states the young director in a sibylline fashion. The rehearsal space is too small for the large ensemble scenes. “When can we rehearse in the village square?” asks the director. “There aren’t any times, you’ll have to arrange it with the others,” comes the answer.

PHOTO 6 – “Dorfplatz unter Tage”: A long journey through the cellars of the abandoned brewery in Neukölln

Cultural programmes for young people are normally offered in the formal and non-formal education sector. Both are bound to institutions and therefore generally take place in the allocated buildings. While schools and training institutions belong to the formal education sector and their attendance is therefore compulsory, participation in the programmes offered by the non-formal education sector (education programmes offered by cultural institutions, youth club work, youth and leisure time facilities, which includes Schlesische27) is conducted on an entirely voluntary basis. The Action Research process has shown that young people do not feel that they are really being addressed by local youth cultural and leisure institutions. Only very few young people participate in the education programmes of the cultural institutions – be it due to a lack of knowledge or the prejudices that they have regarding so-called high-brow culture. They do not want to even consider schools as a possible place for creative activity. All too often art and culture projects both in schools and in the non-school context are seen as a social repair kit. In the process, it has been forgotten that these activities can prompt self-chosen and unconventional questions, life models and changes in perspective. Pragmatic theories of education (as proposed by John Dewey, for example) have long since shifted the focus towards connections to real life and context-based project work, promoting interest in environmental activities and informal learning processes (Bundesjugendkuratorium 2002). Unlike formal and
non-formal learning, informal learning opportunities take place over a lifetime in non-arranged learning situations that are found. They are not bound to a timetable and occur spontaneously in a natural way within the family, neighbourhood, peer group, in clubs or associations, during leisure time activities, at work, in networks or in public and digital spaces. Informal learning also takes place in formal and non-formal educational institutions, for example during break times, during conversations after a trip to the theatre or often simply while ‘hanging out’ and ‘chilling’ together. Even the Commission of the European Communities has taken these learning opportunities into account by supporting various programmes for lifelong learning and improving the standing of informal educational processes (Kommission der Europäischen Gemeinschaften 2001).

**PHOTO 7 – Spandau: Waiting for the crowd to come in**

**Snapshot // ‘Kreative Köpfe’ (Creative Minds)**

Spandau // A vacant, dilapidated pub in a neighbourhood which has not yet been earmarked for gentrification in Spandau Neustadt. There are a lot of things which are different here: three groups share the rooms, they do improvisation theatre and have set up a writing workshop and a photo studio. These processes in the long vacant pub are being sceptically observed by the neighbours and the understanding district police officer (“Oh right, it’s a youth project sponsored by the senate, well that’s okay then.”). At the opening event with 80 young guests, a friend’s band played (hardly louder than the noise from the busy street on the doorstep) and a resident of the building threatened to call the police. Whether out of necessity or virtue, here almost everything automatically becomes community work, as all of the programmes are open to the public. Once a week a creative writing workshop invites people to participate. Children linger in front of the door before they finally muster up the courage to enter, poems are written and read, it is a case of terra incognita – to disrupt or join in? At one of the improvisation groups, the son of the district police officer takes part at some point and eventually the officer joins in too. The photo group – almost like service providers for friends and occasional passers-by – create the appropriate styling for their portraits and work together with a friend who is a make-up artist for the theatrical staging. They experiment with role models from film history and develop rather unusual pictures for a concluding exhibition.
Although those involved do not perceive informal learning as knowledge acquisition, it is an educational process in perhaps its most original form: personal development based on one’s own initiative, which is often stimulated by daily life occurrences pursued in a self-willed manner and through active interactions with others. According to Dohmen (2001) or Rauschenbach, Düx and Sass (2007) ‘learning’ is not limited to formalised education systems or the cognitive rational acquisition of knowledge and technical instrument competence. It is definitely a process that is never completed, for example through qualifications or certificates. In particular, informal learning characterises knowledge that is especially gained through trial, experiment and play, which even in failure will find fruitful ground. It is a wealth of experience and knowledge which enables young people to orient themselves when faced with the diversity of instrumentally acquired knowledge and the limitlessness of the digital and global world. It enables them to explore and answer questions for themselves relating to values, norms and how to design a ‘good life’. As context-dependent experienced-based learning, it cannot be calculated or planned, but it can be encouraged through a stimulating environment. In the place of a teacher, social worker or educator is the real world as a learning environment – and in the case of the tenant project it is particularly the urban landscape that fulfils this role.

With regard to informal learning opportunities, public space is now also being viewed in a new light, serves as an educational landscape (Bildungslandschaft), extending the debate on education through regional, municipal and local perspectives (Reutlinger 2009). It is in this way that the educational and municipal policy concept of “local educational landscapes” (Mack 2007) offers children and young people better conditions and a wider range of educational opportunities in urban centres. This move is not only aimed at involving schools and non-school places of education and persons who are locally active (politicians, backers, craftsmen, artists, home owners etc.) in community work, but also places where children and young people like to congregate, such as streets, malls, parking lots, waste land and vacant properties. Such a social-spatial perspective and environmental approach cannot avoid taking into account informal processes and promoting stimulating learning environments that encourage interaction, communication and self-directed operations.

**Snapshot // ‘Photosphaere’**

Pankow // The photo on the grey wall shows the ‘expedition participants’ huddled together in their sleeping bags. The old-fashioned tiled stove in a former coach-house in Pankow heats as charmingly as it does ineffectively against the winter in Berlin. At least from an urban point of view it is an experiment conducted in extreme conditions for the young pioneers endeavouring to realise an idea that other artists have attempted before. For three months, six young people from various districts of the city will live and work together in the old coach-house, exploring and staging themselves and their surroundings (which are new to them) in Pankow. The temporary living space will serve as an exhibition and document their self-set experimental design: photos, videos, texts, paintings on canvas and their own bodies will be used, all of which will in turn be photographed. They avail themselves of the bequests of invited artists as well as those of neighbours and guests during the open-house Sundays. An old Olympia typewriter requires spontaneous writing stimuli, while colours and cameras call for design interventions. In keeping with the Christmas season, ‘creative cookies’ are baked and a wall is literally filled with small wish lists. The group of six must soon make way for the next tenant group, ‘Kunststaelle’, and will have to look for a new location in the area.
We live in a society that is facing huge economic problems, increasing social inequality and a rapidly diminishing supply of essential resources. Above all it is people’s experiences with the Internet (for example crowd sourcing, flash mobs, social media, etc.) that are increasingly awakening the potential for resistance in the real world. Citizens from all age groups are seizing their right to participate (most recently the Occupy movement) and are seeking to set new ideas in motion through a wide range of bottom-up processes. In this light, it is not surprising that the temporary usage of vacant properties is being increasingly legalised, for example for studios, guerrilla gardening, pop-up stores, exhibition spaces, caretaker’s houses and now also for rented spaces (with the owners either speculating on enhanced value and gentrification or wanting to protect them against illegal squatting, vandalism or building decay).

Encouraging young players to actively use urban spaces is currently being supported by municipalities and federal authorities through various programmes, not only through social or cultural budgets but also by urban development authorities. Thus, the promotion of an environmental approach and sociocultural activities do not only aim at improving the educational level of young people. It also shows that it has been understood at the highest decision-making level that urban and district development not only relates to the territorial and physical function (buildings, infrastructures or floor areas) but to the dynamisation of local places and spaces. It is “The Practice of Everyday Life” (Certeau 1998) in which strategic movements literally ‘fabricate’ space and, with a view to the imaginative potential contained within (e.g. in the form of cognitive maps), ‘fabulate’ creative new dimensions.

Snapshot // ‘Machwerk’ (Creativ workshop),
Wedding // A shop in the residential area of the Soldiner neighbourhood. In the neighbourhood there is a Turkish cultural association and a bakery. The Machwerk youngsters invite others to come and look at their work. In the shop there is a workbench, a rack of bicycle parts, on the wall is the coffee-stained list
of house rules, tools are scattered everywhere, pieces of used wood, a table with a self-made silk screen printing device. Someone is printing T-shirts bearing the Machwerk logo of a flame and a spanner. In the middle of the room is a jacked up bicycle. Numerous generators are connected to a circuit board, which is connected to an amplifier and self-made speakers from the so-called ‘electro-cave’ in which, according to the tenants, ‘rickety old bikes are converted into Knight Riders’. A guest pedals away and uses a nail on the circuit board. The bike does what it should: spread noise. The compressor which was purchased from the budget whirs away and a labyrinth-like tangle of tubes blow the air past the small kitchen into the rear courtyard where the silk screens are cleaned.

PHOTO 9 – Machwerk: Window shutter and self-made bicycles in Wedding

Adopting a more socio-cultural and environmental approach, the project literally promotes the use of “Spaces in Between” (Seitz 2000) and the subversion within a given order and normative concepts – making the utopian potential visible. Similar to a ‘bricoleur’ taking apart what is given and rebuilding it, former functions, signs of previous usage and legacies (an old sign on the façade, the counter that has been left behind, the tool rack that is still in place, the old wallpaper, etc.) are creatively converted or overwritten, revealing different qualities of space appropriation. The place is appropriated in stark contrast to its surroundings and its past. It is changed and given a new meaning. The risk of handing over responsibility – such as nobody controlling the budget, nobody checking that the laws on protecting minors are being observed or that the property is being appropriately used – is perhaps the very reason why the young tenants do not abuse this trust. They use their ‘subversive thinking’ and wilful actions to turn their wishes and dreams into reality. At the general meetings held in the tenant rooms the youngsters invariably discuss and negotiate (often implicitly) personal values and preferences – discussions that can be both unsettling and reassuring, but they always result in the tenants reflecting on and evaluating their own standpoints. The limits of what is feasible or mistakes often
represent a new challenge to achieving the self-determined tasks. The tenants’ rooms are spaces of possibility which enable concrete action. They represent a kind of third path which makes it possible to experience the boundary between inside and outside, between own and others, between private and public as a threshold, rendering it visible as ‘spaces in between’.

**PHOTO 10 – Music instruments made of junk: Listening while congregating in the kitchen of the “Dorfplatz”**

**Snapshot // Der letzte Streich (The last coup)**
Neukölln // the project is drawing to an end and it is time for a celebration. At the ‘Dorfplatz unter Tage’ (Village square underground) it is possible for everyone to cook together, there is enough space and it has a pleasantly ‘rough and ready’ atmosphere. It was hoped that the young tenants in the project would visit each others spaces, but so far this has been a rare occurrence. However, this time almost everyone has made their way here and the Machwerk project members are taking advantage of the opportunity. Having your own space is good, but going out into the world with one’s own inventions is even better, as the noise machine only does what it is meant to do on the street. Everyone and everything with wheels were invited on a trip from Wedding to Neukölln (with quickly abandoned thoughts of the project managers as to whether this was art or an unauthorised demonstration). Approximately 80 young people and around three dozen guests then experienced rappers who rapped, performers who performed, and the Machwerk team had a surprise in store. One lone tenant had built an entire orchestra from scrap and junk. There were percussion instruments made from construction site lamps and buckets, a sound sculpture shaped from sheet metal, a vibraphone made from thick electronic cases played with flip-flops, and basses whose strings were made from bicycle brake cables. Previously undiscovered connections begin to happen during the ensuing jam session. The tenants arrange to meet and work on project ideas together – in the next project cycle.

Even though informal learning is generally unplanned, it often leads to self-determined processes that involve solving a task, a challenging situation or meeting the demands of life. The empty spaces are therefore not merely occupied, but they also demand creative intervention, wilful usage and design transformations. It is inevitable that such an appropriation involves a measure of conflict (for example
with neighbours). The functional usage behaviour of adults contrasts with young people’s desire for playful conversions (Böhnisch & Krisch 2010). They create new room concepts. They not only appropriate spaces, but also ‘create’ and change spaces, providing them with the opportunity to experience being designers of urban environments and to make their mark. The leased rooms make it clear that, in addition to their generally more inwardly directed desire to experiment, young people also need spaces to overcome challenges. Last but not least, they need spaces which bring visibility and recognition.

The project does not adjust young people to prescribed functions or structures, instead it is the youngsters themselves with their usage of the space who formulate the condition of participation: they practice disclosing and negotiating divergent demands and opinions. It is particularly in conflict situations they learn that democracy is not a commodity to be taken for granted. Instead, the principles of democracy must be repeatedly practiced, implemented and newly created. This type of self-determined educational processes not only promote an independent and socially compatible lifestyle, but also the professionalisation of skills and abilities (Steffen 2010) – through contact with the surrounding environment (neighbours, local residents), the working world (crafts, services, art, media) and therefore also through interaction with people they have no obligation towards due to personal connections or milieu membership) – not least through the productive competition between the different groups within a tenant room but also concerning the interchange between the different rooms.

The young tenants are given responsibility for pursuing their interests but are not entirely left on their own. They have a network on hand and mentors who will help them when needed. Sometimes input is given without it being requested, for instance in the Projektschmiede (Project Forge), or unexpected tangents through artistic intervention. Last but not least, the ‘Päfflexionstreffen’ contribute towards the youngsters considering their activities together with the team from Schlesischen and FH Potsdam. Youngsters from all tenant rooms attend this regularly held reflection meeting based on action research that aims to intensify or modify their actions and when necessary to improve them in the next trial phase.
3. Preliminary Upshot

By standing on their own two feet, the young people defy the image that is frequently associated with them, namely that of being destructive or unproductive. They are definitely concerned – about neighbours who, despite prudent precautionary measures implemented by the ‘creative minds’ behind the project, call the police because of the noise, about being kind and passing on their knowledge to children in the neighbourhood who ask the Machwerk team to help with repairing their bicycles, about the quality of the instruments made from junk that should not only sound but also look good, about the chemical bath for making the circuit boards that the Machwerk members also have to dispose of. They worry about whether the toilet paper, the sofas, the cushions and above all the slippers in ‘Heim(e)lich’ will be enough for the expected guests from Köpenick (and possibly from all over Berlin) and whether the poems and the concert will be well received. Their theatrical images show concern for people left to an uncertain and potentially fatal situation in the Mediterranean due to a European asylum policy. In their theatre piece by the name of ‘Dr. Faustus Lichterloh’, they ask whether the invention of light (a metaphor for the human struggle for power in the face of dark realities) also casts light on the self-empowerment which (in their own words) the young tenants have undergone, showing concern for themselves and for others. Who could have imagined that?

Postscript: Does the practice of self-determined learning environments in the end push the tenants into the clutches of neo-liberal forces? Is the tenant project a limitation of opportunities for action, promoting the control of performance in public space in the name of empowerment? Is cultural education a ‘colonization’ of the last remaining liberties, thus promoting the utilitarian exploitation of young people’s determination to become entrepreneurs for themselves? Are fears of this structural dilemma justified? We are on the road to find out!
**Literature**


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1 “Pärflexion” is a play on words based on ‘Pächter’ (tenants), ‘Reflexion’ (reflection) and ‘Perzeption’ (perception). Over the course of the project the meetings were renamed by the tenants with the more catchy word “PAC” – an acronym for Pächter, Action Research and Vitamin C (related to the power the project has).

2 Parts of the present article are published in German (Seitz & Steinkrauss 2013). More information is also available on the website of FH Potsdam (http://sozialwesen.fh-potsdam.de/fb1seitz.html) where one can find a flyer, a poster and the results of the research carried out by students: The first report on the 1st cycle (09/2011-06/2012) reflects a) concept development, b) negotiation, c) public impact and outreach, d) learning impact. The second report on the 2nd cycle (09/12-06/13) reflects a) self-organization, b) environment, c) involvement, d) aesthetic-practice. In addition one may browse on the website of the tenants (http://junge-paechter.de), look at the video the students made (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YckGUOhatK0v) or view the one made by the team of Schlesische27 http://junge-paechter.de