



ExRotaprint Project Description

The spectacular architecture of the Rotaprint complex served as the inspiration and driving force behind the ExRotaprint project. In 1991, the ensemble of Wilhelminian-era commercial buildings and 1950s-era extensions were placed under strict historical monument protection. The buildings designed for Rotaprint by architect Klaus Kirsten and constructed between 1956-1959 represent a significant contribution to Berlin's post-war modernism. After Rotaprint filed for bankruptcy in 1989, the district took over the management of the buildings and rented them for short-term purposes. In 2002, the complex was turned over to the Liegenschaftsfonds Berlin, which was contracted to sell the site. It was to be awarded to the highest bidder. But for Rotaprint—its monument protection limiting what could be torn down or added, existing buildings in dire need of renovation, and located in a low-income district lacking hip bars and galleries—buyers were scarce in the mid-2000s. In 2004, visual artists Daniela Brahm and Les Schliesser conceived of a strategy for taking over the complex via on-site tenants. The goal was to develop the location to serve a heterogeneous mix of uses for Arbeit, Kunst, Soziales (work, art, and community) and affordable rents for all. After two years of negotiations and applying political pressure, we, the on-site tenants, were able to purchase the 10,000-square-meter Rotaprint architectural monument in 2007.

ExRotaprint faced the challenge of developing an ownership model suited to the economic and social realities of a commercial complex. Within a heterogeneous group comprising artists, social organizations, and businesses, differing visions existed that needed to be discussed and moderated. Fantasies of financial profit, investment returns, or securing one's retirement quickly came to the fore and shifted the view away from common interests. During this phase we recognized that the absence of an overarching solution for orchestrating the backlog of renovation work was a significant threat to the internal development of the project given that it might simply disintegrate into fractions of individual ownership. The decision to choose a nonprofit form of ownership was the outcome of intensive discussions. It was not simply a matter of looking after our own individual interests. ExRotaprint was conceived as a space of possibility for realizing new social urban development strategies, free from the exclusionary consequences of speculation and financial profit.

Two contractual agreements with interlinking and complementary aims form the basis of ExRotaprint's legal structure. The contracts ensure the project's long-term development as a nonprofit and its utilization concept, and rule out real estate speculation at this location. They provide the framework within which the social sculpture of ExRotaprint is defined and establish a bulwark against the project being reconfigured in a fundamental way.

In order to secure the low purchase price we negotiated and to prevent us or future generations from reselling the site at a later date, we decided on a heritable building right. The ninety-nine year heritable building right contract was signed with the trias and Edith-Maryon foundations on September 3, 2007. Both foundations work with property in a novel way and are therefore ideal partners for project development where financial profit is not the goal. With the heritable building right, ExRotaprint gGmbH occupies a position equivalent to ownership and is responsible for all aspects of the project's development and financing. Only the selling of the complex is excluded. The legal instrument of the heritable building right separates the land from the buildings: the foundations retain ownership of the land, while the buildings are the property of ExRotaprint gGmbH. For the use of the land, ExRotaprint pays an annual ground rent to the foundations. Our objectives for the project and its development—the renting of equal space to “work, art, and community,” the project's socially integrative nature, and its nonprofit status—were formalized in the heritable building right contract.

ExRotaprint gGmbH was founded on July 17, 2007 by on-site tenants. The organization's nonprofit status eliminates conflicts arising from partial ownership and allows planning to proceed unhindered by individual interests. ExRotaprint gGmbH partners do not profit from the earnings generated by the complex and cannot realize financial gains when selling their stake in the partnership. Created is a location that can be developed over a number of years and on its own terms. This is the de facto profit of ExRotaprint.

The first objective of the ExRotaprint gGmbH partnership agreement is the preservation of the historical architectural monument. Surpluses from rental income go into renovating the buildings. At full rental capacity, the renovation proceeds in phases. Thus far, we have invested 2.3 million euros into preserving the architectural monument; the total cost of renovating the complex is set at 4.2 million euros. The base rents vary between three and five euros per square meter net, excluding heating and other costs. The second objective formalized in the partnership agreement is the promotion of art and culture. This allows us, in addition to consolidating the buildings, to also work on developing content and to free up funding for topics that extend beyond the immediate context. Today, ExRotaprint has ten partners, most of whom are on-site tenants. The eleventh partner is RotaClub e.V., the tenants' association representing all the tenants in the complex, which has a single collective vote. The partners and the managing board of the association meet once a month; a planning team consisting of two partners (Daniela Brahm, Les Schliesser) and two architects (Oliver Clemens, Bernhard Hummel) are responsible for day-to-day project development.

Initiated by artists, ExRotaprint was not conceived as a location for artists alone. From the very outset, we saw creating a common space for people with different occupations, different backgrounds, and histories as a unique opportunity. We specifically rent space to projects working directly with ExRotaprint's surrounding neighborhood. The community outreach organizations—including a German-language school for immigrants, counselling services for the unemployed, a learning center for school dropouts, and a project offering career guidance to youth—ensure that the complex welcomes people who live in Wedding and are part of the social body that makes up the district. Musicians, designers, writers, and artists rent office spaces, practice rooms, and studios. We offer these spaces to young creatives who operate as points of interconnection themselves, are highly involved in their areas of interest, and bring positive energy to the project. The ground floor spaces are reserved for manufacturing businesses: metal construction; workshops working with neoprene and wood; art framing and exhibition design services; serigraphy, electricians, janitorial services, and building contractors occupy the large units. In a district where manufacturing jobs have disappeared, new jobs and educational training opportunities are central to the economic and social stabilization of the surrounding community. The spatial coexistence of manufacturing, creative endeavors, and community services serves as a cross-pollinator for creating mutual exchange, critique, and spawning future growth.

ExRotaprint is a model for ownership without private ownership. Rental income provides the financial basis of the project and covers the costs of the renovation, the building modifications, the annual ground rent, and the operational expenses. Work is remunerated. The purchase price we negotiated in 2007 with the Liegenschaftsfonds might have led to future expectations of financial profit and ultimately greediness. With the involvement of the foundations, we were able to work around the logic of the market and its associated dependencies and risks. The ground rent that ExRotaprint pays annually to the foundations refinances the purchase of the site and enables the foundations to take on new projects of a similar nature. This creates a long-term cash flow extending beyond ExRotaprint and our own interests.

(Text by Daniela Brahm and Les Schliesser)