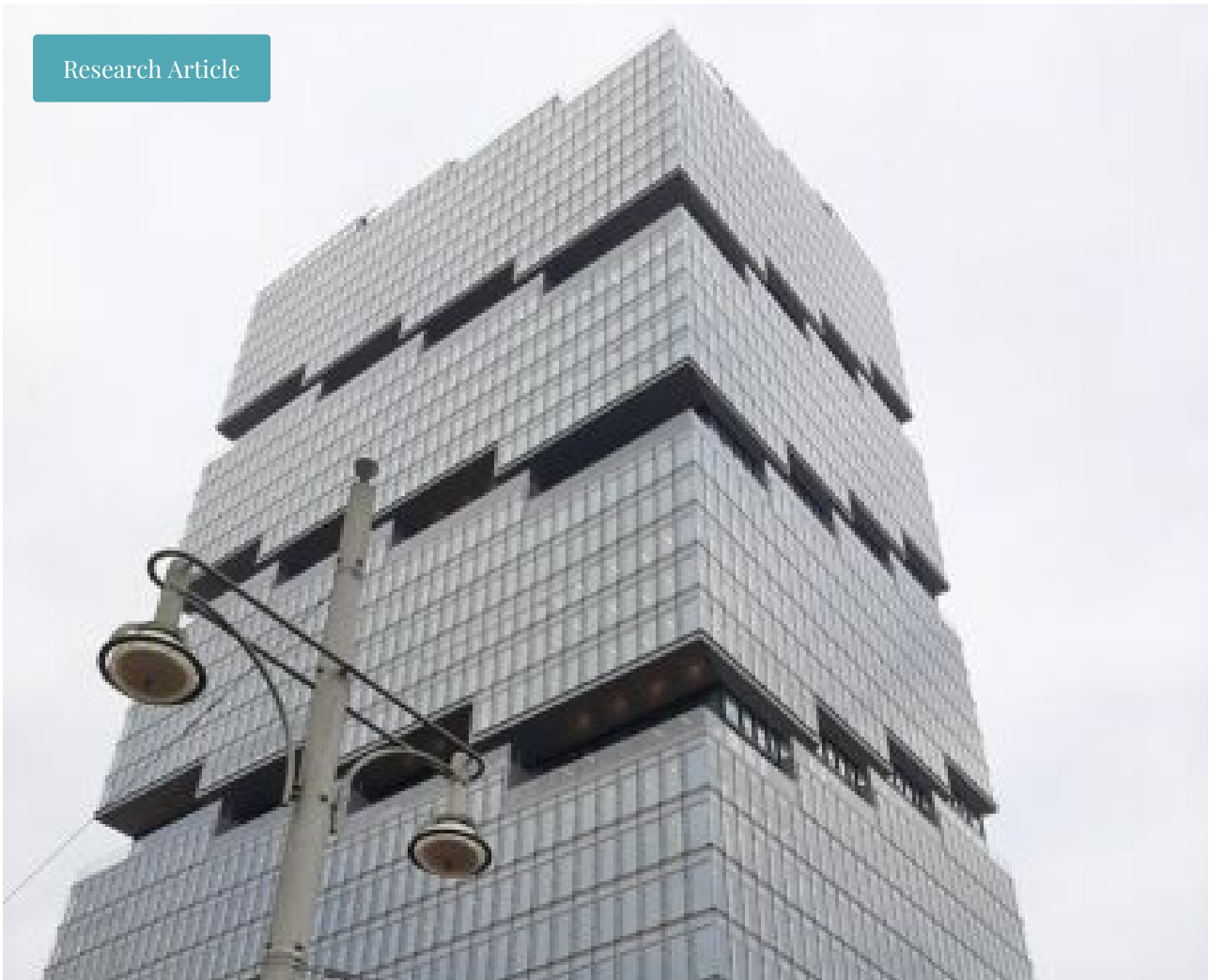


Research Article



Tech Giants as Generators of New Centralities: Countering Hegemonic Narratives in Berlin

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Introduction

In the broad context of urban digitalization, public policy agendas and hegemonic narratives are often intertwined with each other. This makes it hard for both analysts and the public audience to distinguish concrete repercussions on the urban and regional scales. It is particularly difficult, in terms of social, spatial, and environmental effects, to distinguish these from narrative frameworks, wielded by public decision-makers and private stakeholders alike. In a critical view, distinguishing the two levels is critical to appraise the extent to which digital economy, trade, and services are increasingly intertwined in the production/extraction of value *from* the city and *for* the city (OECD, 2024). Within this kind of continuum, the “everyday city” functions are determined by the intersection of “digital” with “development.” On the one hand, globally, this continuum entails the evolution of an ecosystem wherein digital technology is posited to drive economic growth and societal change (ibid.). On the other hand, locally, cities and territories appear to be crossed by tensions that produce significant socio-spatial and environmental effects. While new centralities emerge, connected to the platformization of the digital economy, associated risks and new criticalities also arise, which mainly concern the monopolistic behavior of Tech Giants (TGs), as well as the negligence of workers’ rights. Public policies struggle to address these issues effectively and, while TGs’ business agendas are often aligned with local government’s eagerness to attract digital platforms, unhandled social and spatial frictions have led to harsh contestation, ultimately resulting in urban conflict. The misalignment between local decision-makers and opponents typically resides in the fact that TGs get support from city governments in terms of facilitating real-estate operations aimed at inserting big tech corporate headquarters. To acquire a competitive edge within globalized production networks, cities are resorting to technology-driven firms to speed-up the digitalization processes and, often allegedly, turn new urban polarities into “tech hubs.”

This article aims to unravel the complex relations between the hegemonic narratives enacted by TGs and the new modalities of urban governance, i.e. the integration of platform companies into planning and governance practice. Notably, this scenario stems from the intersection of two emerging trends. The first concerns urban digitalization – a process that intends to embed computational intelligence into the built environment (Greenfield and Shepard, 2007) to ‘optimize’ urban governance processes. The underlying assumption is that technology (notably sensing and smart technologies) and big data can amend politics’ deficiencies by directly informing policy or planning actions. The second trend concerns the emergence of the Platform Economy (PE), where tech-led development is intended as the sole instrument for growth in a society (Rosen and Álvarez León, 2022; Barns, 2020; Sadowski, 2020; Carr and Hesse, 2022). The intersection of these two strands explains the reconfiguration of urban governance wherein TGs enter the field of real estate and land use development, backed by local governments, while seeking public legitimation through the production of overarching narratives.

In this article, we’ll address how big tech’s interests in real estate development contribute to gentrification processes and generate broad dissent. Accordingly, by exploring the contested spaces of PE in Berlin, we intend to unveil and deconstruct TGs’ pervasive

narrative frameworks. It's worth considering that contestations triggered by TG-sponsored-real-estate development involve an array of diverse actors including tech workers, environmental activists, local protesters, and citizens. They all enter these protests for different reasons, yet the fight against big tech serves as a unifying force. In some cases, like the Berlin one, opponents see the opportunity to form a coalition by bringing to the forefront hidden voices and expressions. By tying together local and global activists, the contested space of PE generates trans-national forms of solidarity and becomes a driver for cumulative synergies. The complex dynamics at play in the Berlin case bring out the potential for broad contestations – underpinned by a plurality of voices, claims, and positionalities – as a catalyst for urban change.

The article draws upon a qualitative research approach in both conceptual grounding and case study analysis. Notably, we relied upon a multiplicity of sources and techniques to unravel the complex interplay between rising hegemonic narratives and the shift in governance modalities in the urban policy domain. In terms of empirical research methods, the primary data sources for this enquiry derive from digital platforms (social media, web portals, etc.) that involve extensive review of textual and visual digital recordings produced both by 'bottom up' activists (i.e., collection of tech workers' life stories, mapping of tech ecosystems, press release archives, etc.) and 'top down' by institutional stakeholders and real estate developers (i.e., policy documents and programs, project papers, etc.). The adopted methodological strategy has allowed us to carry out an original 'digital ethnography.' By diving into social media, as well as websites and other online sources, we explored the hybrid space of conflict wherein online and offline strategies are deeply intertwined. Quite often, online activities precede offline events and are instrumental in setting the stage, gathering adhesions, and mobilizing initiatives, through rallies and on-site protests. Accordingly, the account we provide of this hybrid space renders in a rather concrete way the broad span (and articulated nature) of strategies devised to counter hegemonic narratives.

Berlin's Post-Reunification Urban Development Directions

Since the 1990's onwards, after the reunification scene, Berlin's urban-economic development affairs have largely moved from state-led to market-led systems (Ahlfeldt, Maennig and Richter, 2014; Suwala, Kitzmann, and Kulke, 2021). For example, privatization of state/municipal land stock and properties, real estate-driven growth models, high density and mixed-use land (Gualini and Fricke, 2019), and city branding (e.g. creative city, sustainable city, entrepreneurial city, etc.) (Colomb, 2012; Kalandides and Grésillon, 2020). More recently, innovation and tech hubs, such as Zukunftsorte and innovation districts (Dohse, Fornahl, and Vehrke, 2018; Blümel, 2020) are some key strategic moves that have significantly shaped the city's current urban conditions.

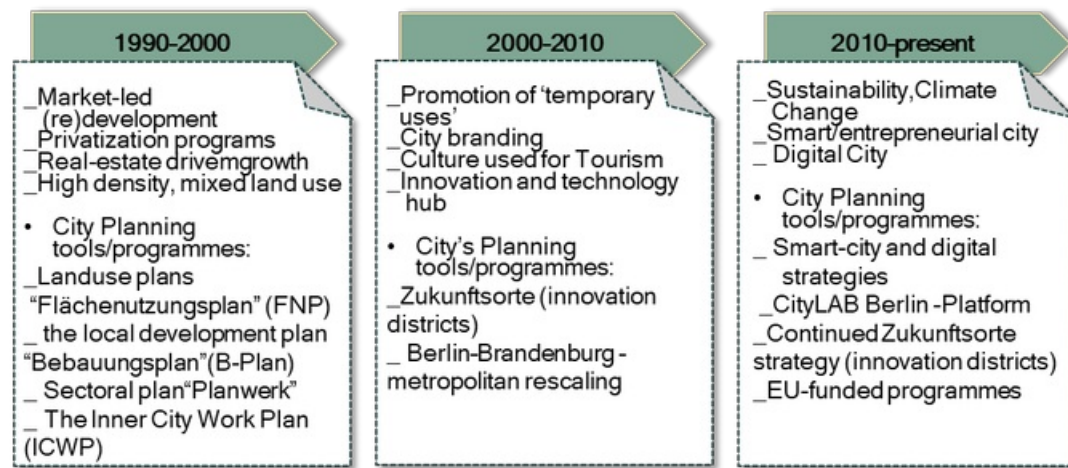


Figure 1. A snapshot of Berlin's major urban-economic directions since the reunification (authors' elaboration).

Over the last decade, Berlin has turned to startups and digital policies (Startup Agenda Berlin, Berlin Smart City Strategies, etc.) through attraction and retention strategies for tech industry investments and high-tech firms (Dauchert and Garzik, 2021). However, the city is still grappling with the unresolved issues from the past, such as gentrification, commercialization pressures, displacement, and governance fragmentations that resulted from previous development directions (Jakob, 2010; Zhao, 2023; Lanz, 2013). In addition, since the last decade, Berlin has also witnessed a population influx. This is highly reflected in the district of Friedrichshain, where the Amazon Tower stands. In 2015, this district had the highest population density in Berlin (Khnaifes, 2018) and was considered a shelter for the highest percentage of migrants and lower income communities in Berlin (ibid).



Figure 2. View of the Spree River. Photo by Deepa Joshi.

This district falls along the Spree River in East Berlin and has been a part of Berlin's large-

scale real estate program, such as the Mediaspree riverfront development. This program also had been the subject of public debate for a long time among city leaders, civic organizations, activists, and citizens, primarily around governance issues (Scharenberg and Bader, 2009; Novy and Colomb, 2013; Ahlfeldt, 2010). Questions arose about the purpose of such development, its socio-spatial repercussions, the target beneficiaries, and the extent of the city's resources allocated to that effort. Since its inception in early 2000, the scheme was promoted and campaigned extensively by both government (the Senate of Berlin, city leaders) and media corporate players 'as an economic opportunity' for investors and real estate developers (Teo, 2016). This episode was primarily a product of a coalition between federal government actors and media corporate players (e.g., Universal, MTV), promising a vision for the city by inviting media and communication industries, international corporation offices, with luxury housing and commercial development attached on both sides of the Spree riverbank that falls in the Kreuzberg-Friedrichshain district (Hesse and Lange, 2012). Here, it is important to note that the location of the Amazon Tower in the Friedrichshain district falls under the former DDR area in East Berlin. There, after the reunification, individual ownership of properties was not encouraged, and most of the government land and properties were sold to a handful of private investors (Khnaifes, 2018; Bodenschatz, 2005). The whole scheme was implemented using a standard state-procured PPP model, covering the areas of the former port and vacant industrial sites along the 3.7 km river stretch. Today, the area stands as partially implemented (only a few land parcels have been developed amid still underused land), and hybridized space, with alternative interventions from grassroots groups, such as Holzmarkt.

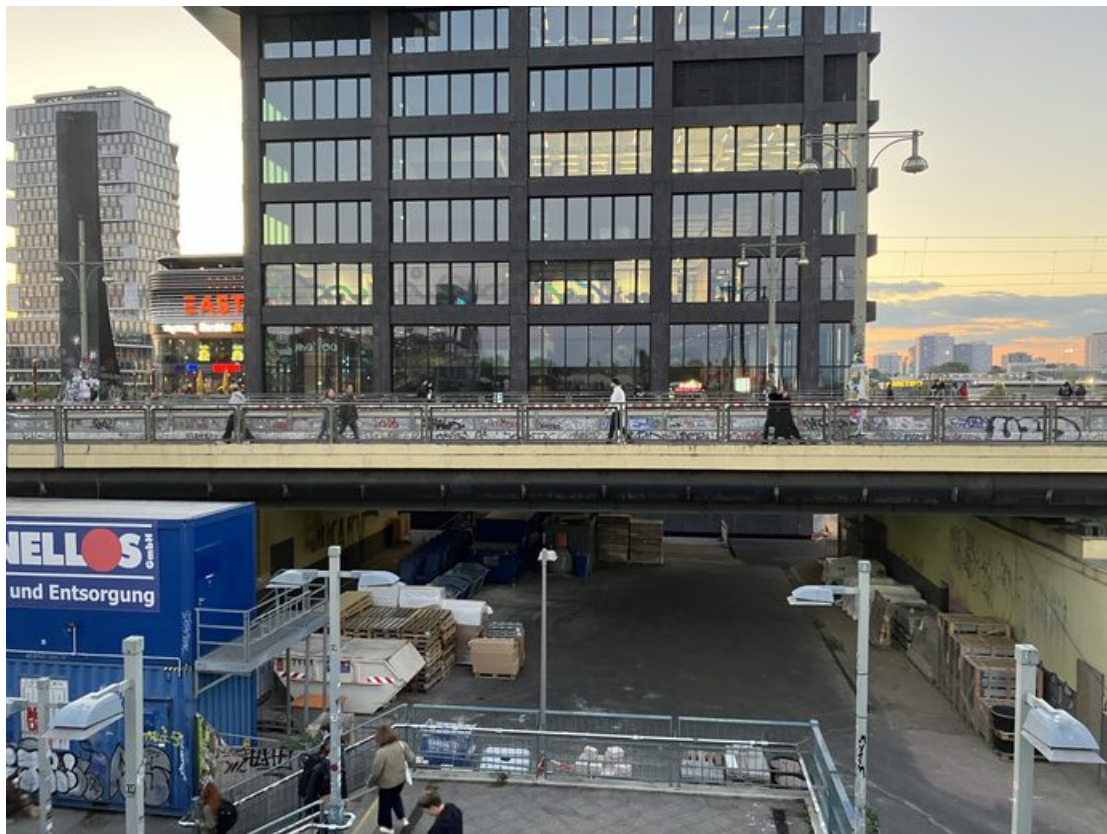


Figure 3. Logistic space beneath the bridge. Photo by Deepa Joshi.

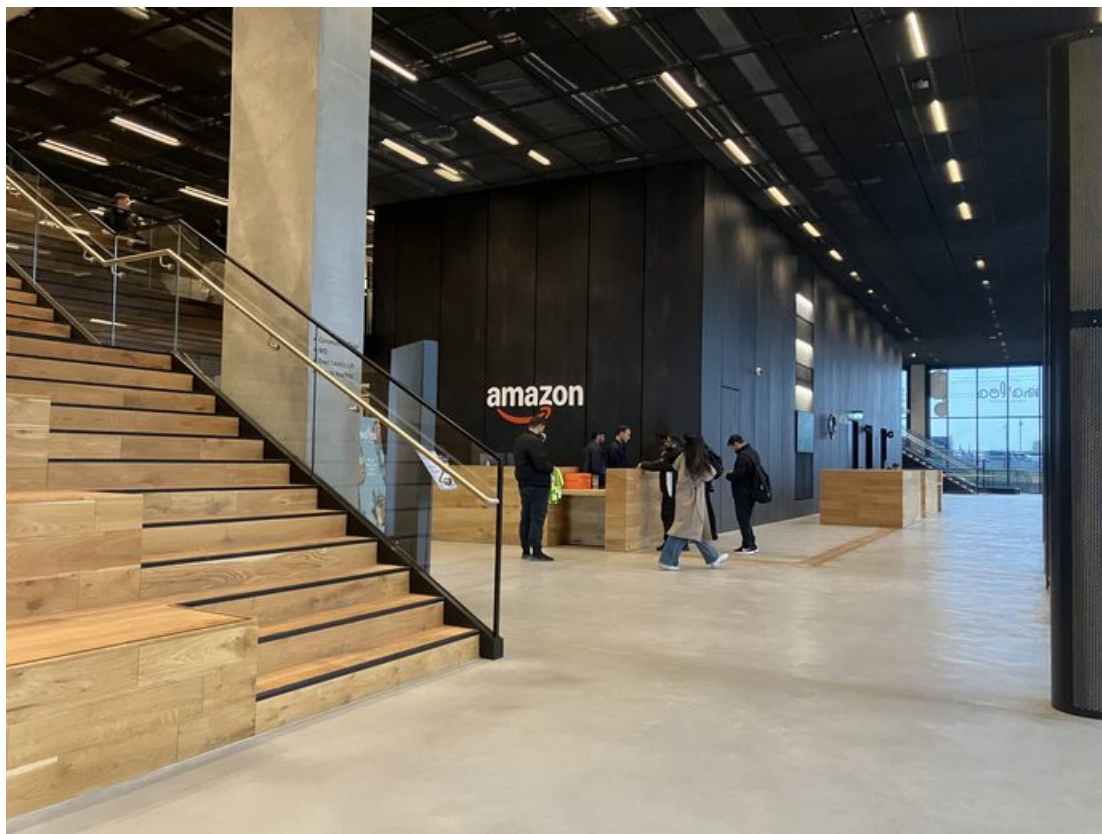


Figure 4. Reception at the ground floor of the Amazon Tower. Photo by Deepa Joshi.

The Amazon Tower as an Opportunity for Berlin

More recently, the city has witnessed a new round of urban-economic regeneration efforts aimed at attracting tech entrepreneurs and TGs like Amazon and Google as desirable targets (Dauchert and Garzik, 2021). From a general perspective, TGs bring high-end jobs and residents – notably, PE jobs (digital, high-tech, information-intensive). In addition, they contribute to a positive image of the city on the world stage. By examining the trajectory of previous development directions in Berlin (see the above section), it appears that the recent arrival of Amazon in Berlin through the construction of the Amazon Tower resembles the older patterns of development efforts (e.g. incentive channels). However, it is now masked with a glossy ‘tech tone,’ which is cumulative rather than transformative. Amazon is a US-based technology-driven global firm. In a relatively short period, it has risen from an online book retailer to a global conglomerate that results from the company’s own intertwined worlds of digital and physical functions. Here we focus on understanding the role of TGs in real estate development in the city, along with capturing the repercussions, i.e. the formation of grassroots conflict with counter-narrative attempts.

Currently, the tower is the city’s highest multi-story building, where Amazon occupies 28 floors out of 36 and is strategically located right next to the city’s landmark, the Warshauer Brücke, the railway station, and the Spree River (Gürgen, 2020). The building falls under the DDR area in Friedrichshain district, East Berlin, where most of the buildings are not more than five stories high. This project is part of the Mediaspree Riverfront Development scheme, which has been Berlin’s largest real estate program, as

already discussed in the above section. This current form of development attempt through TGs in Berlin and the world in general, reveals two things. First, it targets centrally located land parcels in the city through the mask of overarching narratives of city visions and, now, digitalization frameworks. Second, the main proponents are TGs who have positioned themselves in a central role, negotiating technological solutions to (complex) urban problems, thereby generating pressures on the city to create new digitalized built forms and associated infrastructure (often, geared towards their own interests).

This ambitious project, which cost 400 million euros and carried the official name EDGE East Side Berlin, was designed to be mainly used by the Amazon company and was initiated in 2017. The initiative was conceived, planned, designed and implemented through a coalition, comprising its proponent actors from above, i.e. The Berlin's Senate Department-Urban Development, Building and Construction (a federal planning authority), Edge Technologies (project developer), BIG Group (architect team working with design and execution), landowners (a joint venture group – Allianz Insurance, Pimco Prime Real Estate and Bayerische Versorgungskammer – BVK), and surely, Amazon as a key tenant. In its planning, negotiation, and decision-making phase, the project had been a subject of extensive discussion and debate within inter-governmental departments, particularly between federal- and district-level actors. More specifically, there were recorded press controversies between the Chamber of Industry and Commerce, the Senate of Berlin, and the Kreuzberg-Friedrichshain district councilor (Gürgen, 2020; Goldstein, 2019). For example, in 2018, the irregularities and significant deviations in the proposal plan of the tower from its original agreement were brought up by the district construction councilor, who questioned the compatibility of the tower with Berlin's actual needs. This led the Chamber of Industry and Commerce to push the project, arguing the necessity of such projects for the city's economic health (Goldstein, 2019; Pop, 2019), prompting the Senate of Berlin's Urban Development Department to intervene to override the district's planning objections and expedite the building permission and other planning processes as required (Goldstein, 2019). This scene reveals that federal actors and city leaders played a key role in planning processes and decision-making, thereby forming an interplay between only a few actors. This indicates similar footsteps of previous modes of planning practices, though now slightly modified and indirect. Given that Berlin has a long history of real estate-driven growth models, this new combination, particularly with TGs, provided a promising way to acquire economic stability. Finally, in October 2019, the building permission was granted and announced to the public. It was interesting to note that, for such a large project costing 400 million euros, in the whole process, from planning/proposal making to building permission, there were no elements of public consultation events or participation that could be traced.

Into the Conflict: The Anti-Amazon Cause

The construction phase of the Amazon Tower, particularly between 2019 and 2023, encountered a good deal of public opposition, more than the city's previous similar opposition. In 2018, the city had already witnessed similar protests against the establishment of Google's campus in Kreuzberg district, which ultimately led to Google's

withdrawal of the project (O’Kane, 2022). But in the case of Amazon, the city succeeded in building the Amazon Tower in the Friedrichshain district. From October 2019 onwards, the construction of the Amazon Tower triggered the discontent of local activist residents and even tech industry workers, which shaped the conflict in a clear opposing expression, fully against the project: the anti-Amazon cause. Before 2019, there were already voices present in the city against Amazon (Natalia, 2024), though fragmented and representing only a small aspect of resistance in relation to the overarching scale of Amazon. For example, civic and trade union voices were already advocating for issues such as the company’s negligence of its delivery/contract workers’ welfare rights and its approaches to large-scale tax-evasion. It appears that this project added to the underlying voices which were already sprouting against Amazon in Berlin, which also intertwined with multi-scalar and multi-dimensional elements that were political, social, and spatial. The key initiator of the anti-Amazon cause was a local civic activist group, Berlin vs. Amazon, one of the most vocal opponents of Amazon in Berlin, who organized and collaborated with other groups and registered several protests around the Amazon site since 2019 (Berlin vs. Amazon, n.y.). The drivers and motivations of the opposition were, for a variety of reasons, forming a spectrum from specific to general. For example, opposition themes ranged from the negative impact on the district itself (e.g., rising rents, increased traffic, and gentrification pressure) to ethical and political questions (e.g., concerns related to the correct use of space and economic resources, behavior of tech monopolists, etc.). However, despite their wide scope, this time the coalition targeted Amazon’s business methods, the empty space of negotiations from the company’s side, and the city’s endorsement of TGs.

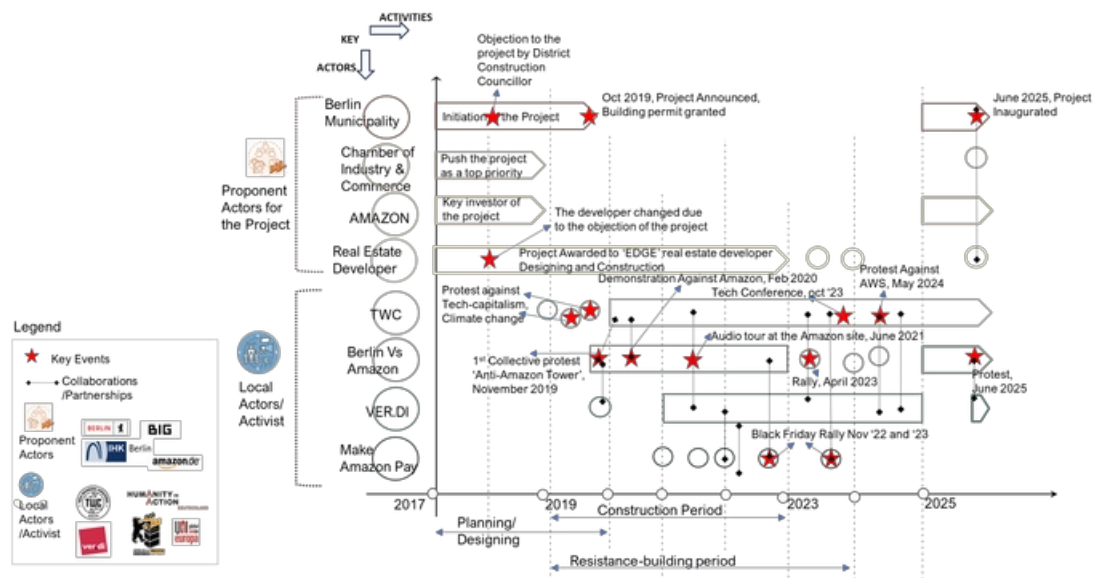


Figure 5. Conflict history-timeline and stakeholders' involvement in the project (authors' elaboration).

The key component of this opposition formation was its scale and structure; unlike the previous example of the Google protest, which was led by a single movement group, here the opposition to the Amazon Tower tied together a bunch of different groups and purposes, such as IT industry tech workers, delivery and contract workers, residents, eco activists, and an anti-gentrification group. It was interesting to note that this time, these diverse groups and purposes recognized that, to counter Amazon, there was a need for a

‘tailored capacity’ (Miller, 2021) at a comparable scale. As a result, this took the shape of a multifaceted, pluralistic, and heterogeneous form that was structured and articulated by its key initiator Berlin vs. Amazon, and kept together other groups under one umbrella, the anti-Amazon cause. Moreover, the structure of this protest platform extended not only horizontally but also vertically in terms of its geographical reach, deliberations, and articulated actions. For example, another key member group, TWC: Tech Worker Coalition, a grassroots collective originating from the US with the objective of uniting the tech industry, primarily contributed by bringing their tech expertise and scaling up the structure, as they are present in multiple countries. However, at the point of our research work, the coalition represented more of a fluid process that built on horizontal collaborations at different scales, exchanging ideas, flaws, and learnings, and is not a neat space but more of an evolutionary space of encounter.

Tools Used in Conflict Mobilization: A Hybrid Space of Online and Offline

Since the beginning, the opposition coalition used online means (e.g., digital channels, social media, surveys, etc.) as their key strategic departure for twofold objectives. First, to articulate, build up, and deploy the offline activities, and second, to mobilize and scale up the opposition agenda, not only against Amazon’s model but also in contesting the centrality of digitalization lenses for the city. Among others, particularly the representatives of TWC (Berlin Tech Workers Coalition, n.y.) were very much involved in identifying the key potentialities and limitations of the coalition itself through connecting the tech workers worldwide, hosting regular monthly online meetings with other member groups, online trainings, and awareness programs concerning tech-industry issues. Overall, it emerged as a hybrid contested space where offline activities (e.g., protests, rallies, campaigns, training, consultations, etc.) were preceded by online deliberations and articulated actions (e.g., trainings, data collection, meetups, mapping exercises, etc.). From an urban planning perspective, these hybrid strategies are relevant, as they point to the deep challenge of ‘the absent arena’ in the city planning and governance practice, where citizens’ needs and aspirations, particularly from marginalized groups or underprivileged sources that do not align with the current mainstream digitalization frameworks, can be recognized, negotiated, and operationalized. In addition, we also acknowledge the fact that strategizing resistance processes, such as mobilization of the public, exchanging ideas, and articulation of needs and aspirations are not a linear process but rather complex, multidirectional, and cyclical exchanges, where continuous deliberations and interactions are core elements to keep building and refining the objective without losing the grassroots traits. Despite the outcome for the opposition, we found that the coalition demonstrated the potential of cross-fertilization between different groups to construct and counter a single cause. In doing so, it has at least paved the way for future counters.

Key Takeaways

The Berlin case is valuable to observe how, and to which extent, large and diverse coalitions can effectively deconstruct prevailing narrative frameworks devised by TGs and

local decision-makers. Although this was not enough to stop the project, the combined, innovative use of digital tools and offline mobilization strategies proved critical in countering the rhetoric of technology-sector-led urban growth. Despite big tech's involvement in real estate, within which no public consultation nor participation ever took place, the contested space of PE in Berlin has become a building block for future initiatives. This is due to the combination of three factors. First, and foremost relevance, the ability of the opponent's coalition to acknowledge, embrace, and keep the reins of a multi-dimensional conflict wherein political, social, and spatial stakes were inextricably intertwined. On the political level, the city government's openly pro-tech real estate policies have triggered the discontent of anti-Amazon activists, who blame the outspoken alignment between TGs' business agendas and local planning and land use policies. On the social level, Amazon's negligence of workers' rights and widespread misconduct (i.e., attested large-scale tax evasion) led opponents to raise their voices against the Amazon Tower megaproject, which soon became the epitome of the company's intent to 'greenwash' its public reputation while covering up attributed faults. On the spatial level, the project's negative impact on the district's cityscape – with increasing rents, traffic and pollution rates, and gentrification – unleashed the local protesters' dissent that erupted into repeated rallies and offline campaigns. The second is the escalation of the conflict to the global scale, thanks to the construction of a transnational network of solidarity among opponents. This has allowed the anti-Amazon cause to grow stronger, especially in the online sphere, and served as a catalyst by gathering voices from previously disconnected realms (tech workers, environmental activists, local citizens, etc.). Third, the cumulative synergies built up throughout the conflict have already been capitalized on by the opponents through the organization of hybrid counter strategies (i.e., online learning groups/programs, digital content creation and database management, mapping exercises, etc.). The sophisticated hybrid articulation of these counter strategies proved critical to strengthen the networks of transnational solidarity while 'fracturing' the hegemonic narratives with fact checking and thorough data collection.

Overall, the mobilization campaign signaled a shift in the broader dynamics of urban development practice, with the key message that proponents – TGs, policymakers, and real-estate operators – cannot take for granted anymore the consent related to technology-sector-led urban growth.

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Deepa Joshi is currently pursuing her PhD at the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies (DASTU) at Politecnico di Milano (Polimi), Italy. Before joining her PhD program, she had worked for a city planning agency, the Delhi Development Authority (DDA), in New Delhi for almost 10 years. Professionally trained as an architect, she was majorly involved in large-scale urban regeneration projects and housing schemes. Her work also exposed her to India's city planning, regulatory environment, and policy ecosystem, particularly the aspects of land use planning and its acquisition, governance, and implementation processes. Later, she also worked with an NGO focused on housing finance, governance models, and data-driven technology adaptations in policy implementations.

Currently, as a PhD fellow at Polimi, her work lies at the intersection of the current trend of data-based technologies through digital platforms, land development, and planning processes. In particular, her work focuses on logistics platforms-led land development, planning processes, and their socio-spatial implications, particularly in areas outside the city. Her research interests also include exploring digitalization frameworks, their operationalization, and the centrality of development and growth narratives through technology for urban spaces.