



# Occupation for expropriation in Berlin

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**Leerstand Hab Ich Saath**

**River Honer** is an activist web developer and data analyst. **Leerstand Hab Ich Saath** is a group made up of grassroots housing organisers including homeless and marginally housed people, who came together during the pandemic to demand homes for all, abiding by principles of community and solidarity.

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## **Abstract**

This paper discusses the efforts by the Leerstand Hab Ich Saath movement to expropriate the building at Haabersaathstrasse 40-48 in Berlin, a former publicly owned apartment building now owned by private landlords. The paper describes the transformation of the building's ownership and tenants and the activism employed by the (LHIS) within the broader context of housing access in Berlin.

## **Keywords**

Expropriation, vacancy, squat, Berlin, occupy

The existing situation of housing insecurity in Berlin has been made worse by the Coronavirus pandemic, which has led to massive job losses that predominantly affect poorer, migrant, and minority ethnic residents. As has been the case in cities globally, unhoused residents are particularly impacted by and vulnerable to virus conditions. In this article we frame housing organizing efforts by the collective 'Leerstand, hab ich saath' (LHIS) in this dire landscape. LHIS is a group made up of grassroots housing organisers including homeless and marginally housed people who came together during the pandemic to demand homes for all, abiding by principles of community and solidarity. Their name, roughly translated from German, means 'Vacancy, I've had enough.' LHIS's actions have forced a discussion in local government, making the case that the state has a responsibility to act against the interests of capital when it impedes on the interests of Berliners.

The amount of beds available to Berlin's homeless people has not been enough to cope with the increased demand due to the homelessness caused by the pandemic. Many of the shelter beds that had been available were by local church institutions, funded with heavy

subsidies from the senate and private donations. The layout of these shelters, usually open rooms with beds or mats, had put homeless people and social workers at increased risk of contracting the Coronavirus, so some shelters were closed. As a result, the city followed other European cities by hiring hotels and hostels to operate as temporary accommodation for the homeless. The shelters formed in these hotels have restrictive policies on alcohol, tobacco, drugs, hours of entry and exit, visitors, and more. People using these facilities are forced to leave during daytime hours, and can only come in at night. These restrictions reduce the autonomy and impinge on the dignity of the residents.

Against the backdrop of the ongoing pandemic, the fast approaching Berlin winter, and a long lasting housing crisis, the collective LHIS came together to pressure the city to confiscate a former publicly owned apartment from private landlords. LHIS members were not content with the government's response, providing accommodation that restricts the autonomy of homeless and marginally housed people, while the autonomy of landlords to replace housing with luxury hotels is prioritised. Their first action was planning a squat in a vacant and furnished apartment building, which since its transfer to private ownership in the mid-2000s, has seen profits bloom for the owners. Yet its tenants, by and large, have faced eviction and neglect.

In 1984, the building at Haabersaathstrasse 40-48 was built by the Berlin senate as housing for the employees of the nearby Charité hospital. At the time it was painted in vibrant colours and known as the 'parrot house' by neighbours. The residents of this building came from diverse social classes and spanned generations. In 2006, the senate sold the building to a private landlord for 2 million euros. After the sale, tenants were swiftly put under pressure to accept higher rents, or to leave. This pressure led many to move out. The new owners had a vision for the property, which did not include the residents. Their plan was to turn what were once affordable homes into short-term rental units and a hotel, accommodating the centre of Berlin, which was growing in popularity with tourists. The owners built a reception room and breakfast dining area, while also making some energy-saving improvements. Visitors to the short-term rental property were often unaware that this building still had any permanent residents. The level of maintenance and care in the building decreased. The remaining tenants had to deal with broken pipes, leaks, defective heating, and broken doorbells. The management continued to neglect the tenants by not fulfilling responsibilities for unit maintenance, meanwhile profiting off of the increasing value of the land and the growing vacation rental market.

In 2017, the tenants living at Haabersaathstrasse 40-48 were informed that the building would be sold to Arcadia Estates for ten times more than the 2 million euros paid by the previous landlord. The previous landlord netted millions in profit despite the neglectful management. The new owner also had plans for the building, of which the remaining tenants were not a part. Arcadia Estates submitted proposals to the city planning department to undertake 'extensive renovation and modernisation,' one of the three legally permissible ways to serve an eviction in Berlin. Tenants began facing pressure and threats of contract termination. To avoid the stress of fighting, many were coerced into signing paltry severance payments, or simply moved out under pressure. One year later, Arcadia Estates changed their

plan and announced the demolition of the building and their intent to build a luxury hotel on the property. Until now, the building has not been demolished, and the apartments sit mostly empty, many of them still furnished from their time as short-term rental apartments.

Between 1993 and 2007, the proportion of apartments in Berlin under public ownership fell from 44% to 20%, Habersaathstrasse 40-48 included. Due to failures of neoliberal supply side housing policy leading to a debt crisis in the 2000s, the city sold off thousands of units to private landlords. These landlords have used the property as speculative investments, or evicted tenants from the modest buildings to replace them with new luxury apartments which are not affordable to most Berliners. All of this has led to a shortage of affordable housing in Berlin, causing eviction, displacement, gentrification, and homelessness.

Upon this landscape, and the growing precarity that unhoused residents were facing amidst the pandemic, members of LHIS wanted to send the message that a roof is not enough, and that they want homes for all. In other words, vacant units should be used to house those who need housing. Beyond that, they envisioned a progressive social housing concept that centred migrants and particularly migrant women's experiences. The collective was not, in short, satisfied with the government's strategies. To make their point, LHIS occupied Habersaathstrasse 40-48, ending the existing vacancy themselves in order to create shelter for those who needed it. The activists entered the building's furnished apartments while a demonstration was held outside. The demonstration included speakers from diverse backgrounds, who made the case not only for the expropriation of the building, but also for the vision for the house they wanted to see. They shared their perspectives on issues of misogyny and sexual violence, and discussed ways to improve the building to this end. They introduced the idea of a women's staircase, and proposed use of the ground floor space. LHIS also organised a bus that made stops around the city, picking up demonstrators who may otherwise not have been able to make it to the protest. The bus provided the mostly homeless participants food and drink, creating a space where they were welcomed guests.

The Berlin police evicted the demonstrators and occupants within hours, inline with Berlin law. Despite this, the action's political statement was still powerful: in the midst of a global pandemic, the city government and police would throw homeless people back on the street, rather than allow them to use apartments that are sitting empty. This message had an impact on members of the district assembly. A few weeks after the action, the Central Berlin District Assembly held a vote siding with LHIS, voting 48 - 40 to confiscate the vacant apartments and make them available as living space for homeless people. Unfortunately the Central Berlin District Assembly does not itself have the power to implement such a policy. The ultimate power for such a decision lies with the Senate. The Senate department of land use has since accepted the demolition, which overrides the decision of the district assembly. The conflicting interests and levels of government have thus left the future of the building uncertain. As the Left Party fights to avoid what they call a 'lazy compromise for the Habersaathstrasse,' the district has decided to use the flats as emergency housing on the grounds of the pandemic. The fight for confiscating the property continues to date among the Senate and District Assembly.

The City Senate has failed to build adequate affordable housing for residents, and the current Social Democrat, Left, and Green Government has shown Berliners that the political parties serve neoliberal corporate interests more than the city's residents. Despite the fact that the Berlin Senate has the power to expropriate landlords in order to use property in the public interest, it is taboo in modern German politics to use these methods. The government prefers to subsidise private businesses to encourage a "social market economy" that meets public needs, rather than make policy decisions that would directly help their citizens.

The action of LHS has created a condition, in which average Berliners can see a context for expropriation as a sensible policy choice. It puts the inherent inhumanity of the free property market on full display and forces the city to make a choice. It also allows citizens to see how the city responds to that choice, and encourages them to take action by showing their elected representatives that they do not agree that buildings should sit empty while people live on the street. Their website provided a letter to send to Berlin representatives to advocate for confiscation. The social market economy has become less and less social and this strategy is not in line with the values of many of Berlin's residents, who show solidarity with their communities by founding multitudes of advocacy groups.

The Habersaathstrasse 40-48 struggle is taking place in the context of an ongoing, large scale movement to expropriate the city's largest private landlord, Deutsche Wohnen, and to socialise their apartment units. Deutsche Wohnen has a reputation in Berlin for inadequate and neglectful management, similar to the private landlords who managed Habersaathstrasse 40-48. Significantly, up to 250,000 apartments in Berlin are owned by landlords who own more than 3,000 units, and Deutsche Wohnen owns more than any other. The movement to disappropriate these units aims to slow the commodification of the Berlin housing market



by what the organisers call “mega-investors,” keeping prices low by now allowing private landlords to own too large swathes of the market. The strategy of this movement, called Expropriate Deutsche Wohnen, is similar to that of LHis. However, instead of pressuring the senate to act in the interest of Berliners, they are organising a people's referendum, to force them to do it. They are relying on the German constitutional article 15, which allows for the socialisation of private land when it is deemed necessary to stop the excesses of capitalism.

The movement for the expropriation of Habersaathstrasse 40-48 and Deutsche Wohnen are part of a mass movement of housing rights activists who are fighting for affordable housing, and who are using all the tools available to them. This includes building, agitating in local government, referenda, and the national constitution. Both groups' strategies to achieve expropriation will be useful lessons for housing activists, and their use is likely to grow in the future. The coalition building to win these battles sets the stage for more collaboration internally and also across Germany, Europe, and the world. Movements such as these are more significant than ever due to the Coronavirus and the housing injustices it has amplified.

## **Resources**

<https://t3sesif6kfapwxm3pt6ikiiovz4--taz-de.translate.goog/Ersatzunterkuenfte/15739440/>

<https://2cywdk7u245h3uyvuz7hjvtxga--www-neues-deutschland-de.translate.goog/artikel/1146165.leere-haeuser-volle-taschen.html>

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