



## Music Venues in Transition

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## MUSIC VENUES IN TRANSITION: STATES OF AUTONOMY, DEPENDENCE AND SUBCULTURAL INSTITUTIONALIZATION

LOCAIS DE MÚSICA EM TRANSIÇÃO: ESTADOS DE AUTONOMIA, DEPENDÊNCIA E INSTITUCIONALIZAÇÃO SUBCULTURAL

LIEUX MUSICAUX EN TRANSITION: ÉTATS D'AUTONOMIE, DÉPENDANCE ET INSTITUTIONNALISATION SOUS-CULTURELLE

LUGARES MUSICALES EN TRANSICIÓN: ESTADOS DE AUTONOMÍA, DEPENDENCIA E INSTITUCIONALIZACIÓN SUBCULTURAL

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**ABSTRACT:** Taking into account changing spatial structures of local music scenes and processes of music production, urban regeneration, and the commercialization of live music during the last decades, this article examines how ongoing transformations of socio-spatial environments exert influence on originally do-it-yourself music venues as a specific kind of urban music space. Venues are understood as individual actors that develop in relation to their initial spatial and cultural strategies. Therefore, the status of these venues reaches from traditionalist but highly dependent to paradoxical forms of “subcultural institutionalization”. Based on empirical data from three case studies in Hamburg, Germany, fieldwork shows that DIY-driven clubs increasingly become hijacked or taken-over spaces that apply different strategies in order to preserve their idea(l)s of self-governed and collective cultural work.

**Keywords:** music venues, scenes, live music, subcultural institutionalization.

**RESUMO:** Levando em conta as mudanças nas estruturas espaciais de cenas musicais locais e processos de produção musical, regeneração urbana e comercialização de música ao vivo durante as últimas décadas, este artigo examina como as transformações em curso dos ambientes socioespaciais exercem influência sobre os locais de música, originalmente desenvolvidos numa prática *do-it-yourself*, como um tipo específico de espaço musical urbano. Os locais são entendidos como atores individuais que se desenvolvem em relação às suas estratégias espaciais e culturais iniciais. Como consequência, o status desses locais vai de tradicionalistas, mas altamente dependentes, a formas paradoxais de “institucionalização subcultural”. Com base em dados empíricos de três estudos de caso em Hamburgo, Alemanha, o trabalho de campo mostra que os clubes *do-it-yourself* se tornam cada vez mais espaços tomados que aplicam estratégias diferentes a fim de preservar seus ideais de trabalho cultural autogovernado e coletivo.

**Palavras-chave:** locais de música, cenas, música ao vivo, institucionalização subcultural.

**RÉSUMÉ:** En tenant compte des changements dans les structures spatiales des scènes musicales locales et des processus de production musicale, de régénération urbaine et de commercialisation de la musique en direct au cours des dernières décennies, cet article examine comment les transformations en cours des environnements socio-spatiaux influencent les lieux de diffusion de la musique, initialement développés dans une *do-it-yourself* pratique, en tant que type spécifique d'espace musical urbain. Les sites sont compris comme des acteurs individuels qui se développent par rapport à leurs stratégies spatiales et culturelles initiales. En conséquence, le statut de ces sites va des traditionalistes, mais très dépendants, à des formes paradoxales d'“institutionnalisation subculturelle”. Sur la base de données empiriques provenant de trois études de cas à Hambourg, en Allemagne, le travail de terrain montre que les clubs *do-it-yourself* sont de plus en plus souvent des lieux d'accueil qui appliquent différentes stratégies afin de préserver leurs idéaux de travail culturel autonome et collectif.

**Mots-clés:** lieux de musique, scènes, musique en direct, institutionnalisation subculturelle.

**RESUMEN:** Levando em conta as mudanças nas estruturas espaciais de cenas musicais locais e processos de produção musical, regeneração urbana e comercialização de música ao vivo durante as últimas décadas, este artigo examina como as transformações em curso dos ambientes socioespaciais exercem influência sobre os locais de música, originalmente desenvolvidos numa prática *do-it-yourself*, como um tipo específico de espaço musical urbano. Os locais são entendidos como atores individuais que se desenvolvem em relação às suas estratégias espaciais e culturais iniciais. Como consequência, o status desses locais vai de tradicionalistas, mas altamente dependentes, a formas paradoxais de “institucionalização subcultural”. Com base em dados empíricos de três estudos de caso em Hamburgo, Alemanha, o trabalho de campo mostra que os clubes *do-it-yourself* se tornam cada vez mais espaços tomados que aplicam estratégias diferentes a fim de preservar sus ideais de autogobierno y trabajo cultural colectivo.

**Palabras-clave:** lugares de música, escenas, música en vivo, institucionalización subcultural.

## 1. Introduction

The development of popular music, especially within subcultures and scenes, is closely aligned to the emergence of scene-related venues since the late 1960s. Nowadays, these often shape significant parts of cultural memory among local and translocal music scenes. Places like the Marquee or 100 Club in London, the CBGB's and Studio 54 in New York, Cavern Club in Liverpool or Starclub in Hamburg have not only become iconic symbols of definite musical styles, but also represent ideals and concepts of alternative communities and mark specific urban locations as "cool" or "subcultural".

Historically, this implies that, as actors of cultural life, music venues feature a variety of meanings and functions. First of all, on the musical level, they are places of new ideas where vast numbers of genres and alternative lifestyles have evolved and been established and refined. In this area, they still "remain important for establishing new trends" (Shuker 2005: 45). On the social level, they connect like-minded people and are a haven for alternative ways of being: "At their best, clubs are places where the marginalized can feel at home, where we can experiment with new identities, new ways of being. They are places where cultures collide" (Garratt 1998: 321). On an economic level, they form an important part of the so-called "independent network" (Spencer 2008), an alternative infrastructure alongside the music industry-based infrastructure and one based on more culturally-oriented, informal and do-it-yourself practices (Bennett & Peterson 2004; McKay 1998; Bennet & Guerra 2018).

Nevertheless, venues are increasingly connected with the global music industry, the development of their urban environment and the (urban) political economy (Frith 2013; Vogt 2005; Kirchberg 1998; Logan & Molotch 1987; Harvey 2013). Taking into account ongoing discourses and antagonisms – from headlines about the "death" of music clubs, the vanishing of scene structures and the effects of gentrification to the rise of live music and the live music economy (Holt 2010; Frith et al 2010) – current challenges raise questions about how the original significance and functions of music venues might have changed during the last decades.

In this article, empirical research explores the evolution and transformation of music venues – from their emergence to the present day and their place within current conditions of the post-industrial city, the loosening of scene structures and the commercialization of live music. Three case studies conducted in Hamburg, Germany, capture the extent to which the original meanings and functions of DIY music venues as collective spaces – and also as a socio-spatial center of local music scenes – have endured over time. In addition, the study explores and reflects on possible adaptations, resistance and processes of negotiation related to the venues' changing environment.

This study focuses on three specific questions: First, how do clubs as local actors handle new modes of music production and community structures? Second, how do venues react to changes within their urban contexts, e.g. urban development and local nighttime economies? And, third, how does the trend towards increasing commercialization of the live music sector affect DIY-based venues? The following section specifies the scope and the theoretical framework of the project, followed by a brief description of its methodological approach. Then the empirical findings are presented, before in the final section I discuss the results and share some first thoughts on the relation between the findings of this study and the effects of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic on the venues.

## 2. DIY, scenes & the venue as a multi-layered space

### 2.1. DIY, scenes and the venue

In an analysis of venues as representatives of alternative cultural forms, a starting point is to study their integration into the concepts of scenes and DIY practices. The formation of such alternative cultural entities are strongly based on the ideas of counter- and subcultural activity in the 1960s and 1970s. “Subcultural ideologies are a means by which youth imagine their own and other social groups, assert their distinctive character and affirm that they are not anonymous members of an undifferentiated mass” (Thornton 1995: 10). Major aspects of this kind of distinction refer to ways of aesthetic and socio-cultural expression and socio-political positioning that in many ways require one’s own initiative: “The DIY movement is about using anything you can get your hands on to shape your own cultural entity; your own version of whatever you think is missing in mainstream culture” (Spencer 2008: 11; McKay 1998). As current research on DIY practices and cultures shows, the evolution of such cultural forms has spread globally and developed into a now prevalent attitude towards cultural work: “DIY has now become synonymous with a broader ethos of lifestyle politics that bonds people together in networks of translocal, alternative cultural production” (Bennett & Guerra 2018: 9, also Bennett 2018).

The concept of scene as a “cultural space in which a range of musical practices coexist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation” (Straw 1991: 373) can be directly linked to DIY cultures, especially in the case of popular music where ‘music scenes are the contexts in which clusters of producers, musicians, and fans share their common musical tastes and collectively distinguish themselves from others’ (Bennett & Peterson 2004: 1). The understanding of scenes contains a specific idea of cultural identity and aesthetic distinction as well as an open social structure in which various actors participate in collective activities – in different ways and intensity:

There is a ring of committed activists whose identity, and sometimes means of employment are tied to the scene. Outside of this is the ring of fans that participate in the scene more or less regularly. The outer ring is made up of “tourists” who enjoy activities within the scene without identifying with it (Lena 2012: 34).

Together with artists and music producers, other central activists work and often pursue DIY-related careers within and for the infrastructure of a scene. They include venue operators, labels, and fanzines. In most cases, this occurs more out of idealistic motivation or status seeking within the scene than out of commercial interest (Bennett 2018; Threadgold 2018; Cluley 2009; Grazian 2013). In this sense, DIY-based venues are spaces of informal social and cultural exchange where scene members meet and build their identity (Pütz 1999; Kuchar 2020).

But regarding the relation between scenes and the cultural economy, scene infrastructures do not exist apart from the more commercial realm of the music industries. Scenes are expressive both inwards and outwards, testifying to the current status of a genre, which might bear the potential to merge into the mainstream (Lena 2012; Blum 2001; Hibbett 2006). This not only implies a processual quality of scene structures, but also shows a possible continuum of motivations and changing conventions among its core actors. They are situated among the

autonomy of DIY, scene idealism, and the heteronomy of economic capital.<sup>2</sup> Following the path of the alterable structure of scenes, related venues also appear heterogeneous in their modes of operation and development over time – from community-run off-spaces to more rationally conceived concert halls. For the purposes of this research, my understanding of these kinds of venues focuses on their proximity to DIY practices and alternative ways of cultural production: They are rather small and informally run social spaces where like-minded people meet and where alternative aesthetic ideas emerge and are refined.

On the other hand, they represent a specific kind of urban space that is connected to a scene or alternative culture as well as to the local and to the conditions of urban life in general – a fact, that aligns them to the urban nature of scenes: “The scene is certainly connected to the city in so far as cities are thought to be breeding grounds of scenes, places where scenes are fertilized” (Blum 2001: 8). In line with previous research on clubs and music venues, scenes are also understood as an urban phenomenon.

Like scenes, DIY venues rely on soft and hard infrastructure: social networks as well as physical spaces (Stahl 2004; Grazian 2004; Lloyd 2006). They build meaning in specific localities and have a lasting effect not only within the scene and the very local (Bennett & Peterson 2004; Connell & Gibson 2003), but also beyond. “Many alternative places... adopt a mythical status for individuals and sub-cultures and, as sites of ‘social centrality’, play a key role in identity-building” (Chatterton & Hollands 2003: 203). As markers of a specific urban territory – at the physical as well as at a symbolic level – they can be understood as the materialization of certain socio-spatial constellations in cities and as symbolic values of the local.

## **2.2. Venues as multi-layered urban spaces in changing environments**

As cultural entities, venues can be described in their various spatial relationships with the scene, the city and the music industries (Currid 2007; Rouleau 2015; Lloyd 2006; Grimm 2005; Reckwitz 2012), making the concept of space a fruitful analytical tool. Following approaches by Martina Löw (2001), Henri Lefèbvre (1974) and David Harvey (1989), space should be considered as relational. It contains coincidental processes of social practice, material production as well as the production of meanings. At the same time the production of space needs a certain set of social resources and is led by purpose – a specific spatial strategy (Löw 2001; Kreckel 1992). As a result of spacing – the situation of people and goods – and the symbolic associations they build, (urban) space reflects formations of social relations and power: it represents a material result of social conditions (Foucault 1991; Lefèbvre 1974). Thus, the identification of spatial constellations and layers is revealing about the state and positioning, the power relations and the action of social subjects.

In an examination of DIY-based venues, the spatial approach accommodates the openness of scenes, the effects of changing conventions within cultural production as well as the development of tangible socio-spatial environments. At the different spatial levels, the venues affect and are affected in different ways, which makes them individual actors on the one hand and multi-layered spatial constellations on the other. Thus, this perspective identifies and explains different levels

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<sup>2</sup> As conceptualized in art worlds (Becker 1982), the cultural field (Bourdieu 1993, 2014), and the production of culture (Peterson 1990).

and overlays of their modes of material production, the production of space and the (re-)production of meanings and spatial practice (Kuchar 2020).

The first field of constellations refers to the relationship of performing spaces and the structural aspects of cultural production. It questions possible changes of the meaning of “scene-based venues” as alternative cultural spaces – from scene-related free spaces open for experimentation, social meeting points, spatial centers, public living rooms or Third Places (Steets 2007; Oldenburg 1989, Finnegan 1989; Grimm 2005; Grazian 2013; Vogt 2005) to more functionalized “cool” places of music exploitation and consumption (Holt 2014, 2015; McGuigan 2009). This implies a general tendency towards decentralization as well as a decreasing stability of and idealism within scenes, as David Grazian’s (2013) concept of “micro-scenes” or Jan Michael Kühn’s (2017) work on processes of scene-based commercialization show. In music production, tendencies towards more “artpreneurial” or creative-entrepreneurial modes of cultural work and the fragmentation of music styles and scenes into micro-niches might cause a crisis of identity among the clubs (Just 2014; Diederichsen 2013; Chaney 2004; McRobbie 2002; Schwanhäüßer 2014; Just 2014; Cluley 2009; Reitsamer 2011).

Considering the relationship between the venues and the city, the second strand of spatial analysis focuses on the role of DIY venues in urban development and regeneration over the last decades as well as, more generally, the changing role of culture in the global competition among cities (Zukin 1995; Sassen 1996; Reckwitz 2012; Lloyd 2006, 2014; Kirchberg 2014). Ongoing processes of culturalization and cultural instrumentalization are key selling points in city policies that have taken up popular and alternative forms of local cultural production in pursuit of symbolic value. “The city has thus been ingrained in popular music culture; hence twentieth century styles of rock and pop have been described as ‘the sound of the city’ and as ‘urban rhythms’” (Cohen 2007: 2). In a more general sense, what is “often called ‘neoliberal urbanization’ is marked by a seemingly endless search to find, promote and exploit other noneconomic qualities that can enhance a city’s comparative advantages” (Polk O’Meara & Tretter 2013: 56; see also Brenner & Theodore 2002).

As a consequence, local scenes and venues increasingly find themselves advertised as tourist spots, separated from their original meaning as alternative or even countercultural collective spaces (Hannigan 1998; Grazian 2004). Accelerated gentrification, symbolic instrumentalization and strong tendencies towards the commercialization and standardization of the urban “nighttime economy” by using “subcultural”, pseudo-authentic and “cool” atmospheres (Chatterton & Hollands 2003, 2002; Grazian 2004; Holt 2013; Fichna 2011) affect and also challenge the venues’ spatial strategies and resources, their relation towards the city and urban planning and the positioning of scene-based venues within the city space. As gentrification may lead to difficulties for venues to keep their original location (Rouleau 2015; Holt 2013), symbolic instrumentalization represents an even bigger problem for the way clubs are seen by the local scene(s). Indeed, as Chatterton and Hollands and others (e.g. Jonathan Rouleau 2015 or Silvia Rief 2011) illustrate, alternative venues try to preserve their original spatial practice: “In many places, older or rebellious modes of production are still evident and sit uncomfortably alongside newer, stylish nightlife, and there is some evidence of resistance” (Chatterton & Hollands 2003: 44). But the question remains how a club that appears in tourist guides and in official leaflets can remain credible from an alternative view and how the venues can handle the resulting changes in their urban environment.

The third thematic strand of socio-spatial analysis examines current relationships between DIY venues and the live music sector, which takes a similar direction as the urban nighttime economy. Numerous publications identify the dominant economic significance of live music, but also an increasing separation of the local and the global live music sector as new gatekeepers emerge and the culture of live music changes (Frith 2013; Holt 2010; Wikström 2013). Music industries have moved on from an era dominated by the record industry to one dominated by a few live music corporations like Live Nation or Eventim (Williamson & Cloonan 2007; Wikström 2013; Budnick & Baron 2011). In these developments since the 1990s (Brennan 2010), Fabian Holt (2014) observes the emergence of a new live music culture featuring an increasing number of larger and more commercial clubs that create a market for headliner artists in rationally optimized venue facilities. In clear contrast to scene-based and underground venues, key features of this development are, he notes, the “creation of neutral spaces that are comfortable and appealing to middle class aesthetics” and “instrumental rationale business practices.” As a result, “clubs balance between mainstream cool, aesthetic elegance, and optimized service on the one hand and conventional notions of rock club authenticity associated with the ... scene on the other” (Holt 2013: 167).

From a cultural perspective, Simon Frith (2013: 17) reflects on problems that accompany the concentrated live music market. “The live music sector has its own necessary eco-system. It depends on flourishing local live scenes.” Local live scenes include the organizational logic of scene infrastructures and scene economies with their specific commercial and aesthetic conventions (Kühn 2017) and represent the important role of alternative venues as drivers of musical innovation and practice space for newcomers (Frith 2013). Oligopolistic structures certainly impose increasing economic pressure on DIY-based venues and raise the question how (former) underground venues adapt features of the new live music culture.

Thus, spatial constellations and overlays of DIY-based venues encompass initial motivations of DIY or scene-related practices as well as the impact from transformations in their most relevant social environments. As developments in the fields of music production and community structures, the city and the music industries show there are many influences and possible paths DIY venues might follow – from resisting all influences to being caught up in new cultural practices. The social reality of the venues analyzed in this study originate from a specific collective idea and assemble various individually perceived and pursued aspects of social, political, cultural and economic values at different points of time. Thus, even spaces that belong to the same scene might evolve in very different ways, especially as motivation might change and impacts vary. So a central part of the empirical case studies conducted in Hamburg is to examine how venues that were originally DIY are handling the effects of changing environments and how they develop over time.

### **3. Methodology: Data collection and case studies in Hamburg St. Pauli**

In order to explore clubs and their local environment, three distinctive clubs in Hamburg were selected as case studies. The area of analysis was Hamburg, a major city in northern Germany. As many other port cities, urban regeneration in Hamburg at first focused on waterfront architecture and culture (Friedrichs & Dangschat 1993; Kokot 2008; Rottgard 2010; Cohen 2007; 2013). The city incorporates many aspects of entrepreneurial creative city policies like milestone projects and image building by exploiting local culture and initiating cultural events, for example the new Elbphilharmonie concert hall and the Reeperbahn Festival. “The mainstream urban politics and policies of this city [Hamburg] illustrate quite clearly how a socially, environmentally and culturally

unsustainable urban development caters solely to the creative class in a Floridian sense” (Kirchberg & Kagan 2013: 142). Urban development in Hamburg clearly corresponds to the major trends of urban regeneration witnessed over the last decades.

The research was conducted in the district of St. Pauli, a place particularly affected by these kinds of interventions. In the mid-1980s, the former red light district near the port became a center of alternative lifestyles and DIY-related cultural scenes sharing similar sets of socio-cultural attitudes. During the late 1990s and early 2000s it was turned into a hub of the consumption-oriented nighttime economy and gentrification (Grimm 2005, 2014; Kuhn 2003; Persello 2013; Twickel 2010; Kuchar 2014). As a consequence, it lost more and more of its local narratives and its historically grown socio-spatial structure (Vogelpohl 2012; Persello 2013). But due to the district’s history there is a strong solidarity for alternative lifestyles and broad networks of resistance against gentrification and neoliberal city policies, making it an interesting environment to research the development of scene-based venues and DIY practices (Kirchberg & Kagan 2013; Kuchar 2014). In terms of methodology, the area of research represents “a clear and well defined example that provides evidence for the particular phenomenon the researcher of cities is studying and the analysis of which can be generalized to other similar cases” (Chen et al. 2013: 81).

The case studies were conducted among three specific venues: Mojo Club, Molotow, and Golden Pudel Club. All are situated in Hamburg’s St. Pauli district and were founded in a scene or DIY context between 1989 and 1994, enabling a longitudinal analysis that explains current developments from a historical view. All three cases were directly related to the transformation of urban space and each of them was selected for different theoretical characteristics of self-representation, acting and positioning.

The data collection and analysis of the individual cases was based on ethnographic research combining narrative and expert interviews of venue operators, venue associations, experts in the local scenes as well as field research and archived materials. In the end, the data set consisted of 9 interviews of 13 insiders of the local music culture and multiple data points (275). Data analysis used qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2010; Babbie 2004) and included a historical reconstruction of the clubs regarding changes, effects of urban transformation and their role as agents of spatial production. A central part of the analysis was a comparative analysis of the three cases to explore the development of the venues’ different self-representations and (self-)positionings as well as different overlaps of spatial production within the three theoretical dimensions. As there is little empirically verified knowledge in the field of researching DIY venues, the study was designed to be explorative. Research design was oriented to theoretical implications, but also conducted as openly as possible in order not to overlook new aspects emerging out of the empirical data. Having been involved in the DIY music scene himself, the author’s methodological considerations also reflect the potentials and risks regarding the practice of insider research among youth cultures (Bennett 2003; Hodkinson 2005). While there is easier access to informants and sources of information, it forces the researcher to pay strict attention to keeping a critical distance so as not to “assume the role of ‘subcultural’ spokesperson” (Bennett 2003; McGuigan 1992).



## 4. Empirical findings: From affiliation and traditionalism to 'subcultural trusts'

### 4.1. Mojo Club – from underground brand to underprivileged cultural institution

The venue Mojo Club was opened in 1991 by avant-garde music lovers Leif Nüske and Oliver Korthals. Triggered by the second wave of mod-culture in the 1980s, the founders focused on the roots of mod from the 1950s and 1960s and created their own aesthetic concept by mixing soul, jazz and acid house, important styles within the developing alternative culture in St. Pauli at the time. By providing a space for a new experimental club culture introducing dancefloor jazz, trip hop but also pop literature and very experimental forms like café abstrait (a kind of chill-out clubbing), Mojo Club became one of Germany's most influential clubs during the early 1990s. Closed in 2003 due to planned reconstruction by the proprietors and temporarily continued under the name Mandarin Casino until 2007, the premises of Mojo were finally demolished. But with the help of investors and local political actors, Mojo Club re-opened in 2013 in the same location, but integrated into the basement of a new postmodern building called Dancing Towers.<sup>3</sup> Designed in the shape of a classical concert hall and well equipped, it now appears more in line with the "new live culture" (Holt 2010; 2014) than a venue based on DIY practices.

As a look at its beginnings shows, the venue has not always had the relatively established position it now has: "We improvised a lot. The PA and some lights were rented, the bar we constructed on our own, we got ice cubes from McDonald's and used some diascopies" (Korthals & Nüske, in Seufert & Ebelseder 2001). The founders' own ideas also closely corresponded to the ideals of DIY practice: "We didn't think we were a cultural institution – that's something subsidized and sophisticated. It was just like 'leave us alone and let us do what we want. We don't want to disturb anyone but don't want to be disturbed either'" (Nüske 2017, 12). By opening a clothing store for club wear and releasing dancefloor jazz samplers, Mojo not only tended to exploit its own aesthetic, but also built a whole infrastructure for delivering a distinctive style. This led to the forming of a community around the venue, which corresponds to the concept of neo-tribes in club culture research (Bennett 2000; Thornton 1995). At the same time, the venue was described as uniting many characteristics of a community space: "Mojo was small, cozy, relaxed and hip without being obtrusive" (Mischke 2008: 293), "a smoky and raunchy hell – like a living-room ... where freaks, musicians and flashy artists go" (Enghusen 2013).

Currently many things about the club have been turned upside down: It changed from a DIY-led laboratory of ideas into an established institution close to mainstream space and the urban growth coalition. There is little willingness to experiment and a recognizable distance between the venue and the local music scene. "Everything has changed ... free space and autonomy mostly disappeared" (Nüske 2017, 12). From the original concept it developed into a formal cultural institution lacking public support. "So, you're the managing director. State-funded institutions therefore have two or three positions. Yes, I define ourselves as being a completely underprivileged cultural institution" (Nüske 2017, 12). But at the same time, the initial motivation of realizing one's own ideas is still embedded in the tradeoff the venue made between DIY autonomy and its pragmatic handling of adaptations to its changing environments.

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<sup>3</sup> The Dancing Towers are a new building complex designed by architect Hadi Teherani. Containing offices, a hotel and various restaurants and eating places it is intended as a new and representative gateway to the Reeperbahn, the well-known Hamburg district for nighttime entertainment.

The development of Mojo Club shows its focus on the ideas and attitudes of the founders, who also capitalized on the symbolic and spatial meaning of the club. Its venue in the Reeperbahn represents an iconic marker of alternative culture in St. Pauli and so in order to survive they decided to be part of the game of urban regeneration, which came at the cost of becoming more of an established institution and a tool for the city's branding of St. Pauli.

#### **4.2. Molotow Club as precarious underground traditionalism**

In contrast to Mojo Club, Molotow was a traditional independent rock venue from the beginning. Founded in 1990 until 2013 and situated in a cellar at the former Esso building complex<sup>4</sup> in the Reeperbahn, it has always been through high and low phases. After being rescued from bankruptcy by a donation project initiated by its guests and local activists in 2008, the building complex resisted plans to rebuild it for years. Finally, the club lost its venue after a sudden decision to clear the site in 2013. After a temporary exile in spring 2014 it is now situated at an alternate location in the Reeperbahn (Meißner 2016). But its future is not secured as the venue might not be able to return to the rebuilt Esso buildings and at the current location they depend on rent subsidies from the local authorities.

From the early days of the venue, there was a clear DIY and scene orientation: "We wanted to have a place for that – what we like to listen to – and for some like-minded people around as well. There was no such a space in the 1980s. It was hard to find a place to listen to the music you wanted to. And where you could see live bands" (Schmidt 2017, l1). As a collective space of underground music culture, the founder was explicitly focused on realizing socio-cultural and idealist values, but had to deal with the economic problems facing small venues and the performing arts in general (Music Venue Trust 2015; Baumol & Bowen 1966). "If we were business-oriented, we would do mainstream foam parties, but no concerts" (Schmidt 2017, l1).

The socio-spatial meaning of the venue is fed by the music and by its recognition as part of the neighborhood. The strong symbolic meaning as a part of "the old St. Pauli" explains the deep support and solidarity by the neighborhood and the local music scene. In this sense, Molotow club reflects a mixture of features of residual and alternative nighttime spaces (Chatterton & Hollands 2002).

But a contemporary perspective reveals a very traditionalist attitude towards DIY music venues and underground music culture. "So, we still only do the bands we like. That maybe also is a characteristic of a live music club. Yes, occasionally we rent the club to external promoters, but we only book what we like and what we think people are interested in" (Schmidt 2017, l1). Molotow gradually adapted its practices to the increasing economic pressure, for example by combining concerts and club nights or occasionally renting the club to promoters, but the focus remains on preserving its image. Its rebellious underground attitude is manifested in all the interior furnishings – even a tagged wall, mirrors and the towel racks from the toilet rooms – that the club had moved from the old location to the new. "If we hadn't been tenacious, we would have closed down long ago. And I think it's valuable to defend what we do. I don't want to sound sentimental, but I think

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<sup>4</sup> The Esso building complex was a combination of buildings from the 1950s containing three housing blocks, a gas station and, on the side of the Reeperbahn, various old-fashioned bars, a hotel and Molotow Club. It was demolished in 2014 and was to be replaced by a new building complex, the so-called Paloma Quarter, whose planning included a participatory neighborhood project.

it would be very bad if there wasn't anything subcultural left around here" (Schmidt 2017, 11). The club tries to stay "an island of collective cultural space" in an increasing commercial and gentrified environment.

A number of trends – the decentralization of local music scenes, more planned and less spontaneous concert attendance and the venue's loss of meaning as a public living room and meeting point for scene members – has not made it any easier for the venue to retain its socio-spatial practices (Rothaug 2017, 17; Schölermann 2017, 16). Along with its precarious status related to its location, Molotow has become increasingly dependent on external actors, especially on the city government and on commitments by the real estate investors planning the new Esso building complex.

The reason the city government supports Molotow – as with Mojo Club – derives from its symbolic meaning as a cultural space and socio-spatial anchor maintaining the image of "the old St. Pauli" as a mixture of red light and alternative music district. But it is questionable how long the city government will continue to recognize the value of Molotow.

#### **4.3. Golden Pudel Club: from resistance to a 'subcultural trust'**

The third case is Golden Pudel Club, which was founded in 1988 by Schorsch Kamerun and Rocko Schamoni, artists in the so-called Hamburg School scene.<sup>5</sup> In 1994 the venue moved to its current location, a small old house in the port that was once a prison for smugglers. From the very beginning, Pudel was a DIY-driven, countercultural and experimental space – always in a precarious state endangered by gentrification and commercialization processes (Schamoni 2017, 14). Refusing to sell out, Pudel has been an active member in neighborhood initiatives like Park Fiction, a bottom-up park project realized between 2003 and 2005, and the Hamburg Right to the City movement. Beginning in the late 2000s the club suffered from a conflict among its owners about its development. In early 2016 the venue burnt down following an arson attack. Its future was first secured in 2017 when, after receiving expressions of solidarity from the community and financial support from the local government, the Cassens arts foundation bought the property, turning Golden Pudel into a kind of "subcultural public trust." After resisting all the influences and changes in its social environments, Pudel was finally institutionalized as a sub- or countercultural collective space.

Compared to the other cases, it is apparent that Golden Pudel Club has not modified its initial goals as its socio-spatial practices remain closely linked to aesthetic experimentation and DIY culture: "Somehow it has always been a playground. It just was like 'no one ever cares about the success of an event – as long we have fun'" (Knothe, Marek & Köster 2017, 13). To a large extent current developments allow the venue to maintain its ideal of autonomy, despite having to make compromises – especially by accepting public funding. But without this support, Pudel would probably not have survived to continue its struggle. In this sense, the ideal "to be independent of everything. The club just relies on itself, the people and their ideas" (Schamoni, 2017, 14) might

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<sup>5</sup> The Hamburg School was a local scene that emerged in the mid-1980s in Hamburg St. Pauli as a community of artists united more by a critical attitude than by a distinct style. It was formed by innovative bands using German lyrics, originating with punk and German new wave leading to anything from post-punk to electronic music (Grimm 2005, 2014).

have been somewhat restricted, but the Pudel Club reflects the most stable spatial constellation of the three cases.

In contrast, its becoming part of the establishment and the loss of precarity were reasons to reflect on the venue's own policy about maintaining its open and spontaneous creative approach. "For the first time, we have to do long term planning. I hope we can keep doing the things like we used to" (Knothe, Marek & Köster 2017, 13). Studies of scenes and DIY cultures show that institutionalization changes how a club operates and, in this sense, Golden Pudel Collective faces the challenge of retaining its socio-spatial practice. "I hope that this won't become our fate or a disadvantage. We never knew how long we could do this. And so, there was a certain degree of freedom in how we thought and acted" (Knothe, Marek & Köster 2017, 13). In contrast to the traditionalism of Molotow, the practice of Golden Pudel has always been based on aesthetic renewal. A transformation from a practice characterized by spontaneity, openness and participation into a practice of routine might bear risks of the club ending up as a kind of subcultural museum or as a musealized piece of local subcultural activity.

Golden Pudel not only represents an ideal-typical collective cultural space that emerged straight out of a scene, it is also an active member of the St. Pauli neighborhood. This makes it a hot spot of the local underground arts scene as well as a space of resistance against neoliberal urban development and cultural commercialization in St. Pauli, a symbolic value that fits very well into Hamburg's branding strategy of being a culturally vital and tolerant city. In summary, the practice of resistance exercised by Golden Pudel Club has succeeded in holding off considerable adaptations of its spatial practice to changing environments, but institutionalization might still impact the venue in the future.

##### **5. Discussion: Venues, (in-)dependence – and the pandemic**

In this empirical study, three findings become apparent. First, sharing similar contexts of emergence and similar sets of spatial practice, the venues analyzed nevertheless each apply individual strategies to face changes within their socio-spatial contexts (Kuchar 2020). Reactions between tendencies of assimilation, traditionalism and resistance illustrate music venues as active and individual actors.

Second, structural transformation leads to ongoing negotiations between alternative spatial practice and the dominating powers of socio-spatial environments. The degree of convergence towards the dominating social forces is decisive in maintaining a club's initial socio-spatial practice. As the case of Mojo Club shows, the pragmatic handling of changing conditions doesn't leave much space for experimentation and the social functions venues originally provided, which tracks notions of a new live music culture (Holt 2010, 2014). In the case of Molotow, pursuing the ideals of independent music culture has led to a situation in which it lost its independence as a club. This phenomenon can be observed in different cities (e.g. CBGB, 100Club) as this type of venue is increasingly becoming a victim of the changing social conditions focused on in the research presented here.

Finally, as the empirical data clearly shows, the venues' symbolic value represents an essential resource – especially with regard to city officials hoping to present attractive urban imagery (Zukin

1995; Reckwitz 2012). As the spatial resources necessary to retain alternative venues increase,<sup>6</sup> the city's recognition of their symbolic potentials offers opportunities of support – at the political as well as at the financial level. But there is a price to pay: The symbolic instrumentalization of authentic DIY practice in touristified images might cause problems in credibility (Grazian 2004, Rouleau 2015), while the institutionalization of alternative cultural practices could also lead to new kinds of constitutional challenges – as the case of Golden Pudel Club illustrates. But, after all, the symbolic value of DIY venues bears another important aspect: Inscribing their practice, location and associations into their local contexts, venues – as the visible and tangible outcomes of scene structures and cultural networks – provide an important meaning of local identity and identity building among the users of a particular city space, which leads to a strong connectivity of the venues and “their” localities. This would explain the venues’ experience of neighborhood solidarity and point to an undeniable fact: the creation of cultural memory by alternative cultural production (Bennett & Rogers 2016).

An initial classification of pathways (see Table 1) among DIY-based venues seems to be a fruitful way to broaden the perspective and to illustrate the different spatial overlays aggregated in a venue space. The table integrates further insights from research on alternative visual-art spaces in the city (Kirchberg & Kagan 2013) to show three distinct types of trajectories – from the more pragmatic orientation based on the founders’ own aesthetic ideas to political and artistic avant-gardism and the precarity of scene-related traditionalism.

|                            | <b>Aesthetic-oriented pragmatism (Mojo)</b>            | <b>Political-artistic avant-gardism (Pudel)</b>     | <b>Scene-based traditionalism (Molotow)</b>       |
|----------------------------|--|---|---|
| <b>Features</b>            | Individual DIY concept                                 | Collective origin                                   | Collective origin                                 |
|                            | No direct link to a particular scene                   | Meeting point of scenes                             | Independent/ scene context                        |
|                            | “Doing something”                                      | Critical attitude                                   | More critical, less activist                      |
|                            | Open-minded towards economic success                   | Distancing from commercial goals                    | Traditionalist                                    |
|                            | Aim: Realize own ideas                                 | Aim: Experimentation, autonomy, alternative culture | Aim: Survival, autonomy                           |
| <b>Handling of changes</b> | Pragmatism<br>Convergence towards dominant conventions | Resistance<br>Artistic renewal                      | Skepticism<br>Necessary adaptations/modifications |
| <b>Outcomes</b>            | Formalization/institutionalization                     | Reorganization/institutionalization                 | Dependence/ precarity                             |

**Table 1 - Trajectories of DIY venues.**  
Source: based on Kuchar 2020: 259.

As these three types of venues show, there are major differences reflecting the varying degrees of socio-political involvement, the differing commitment to DIY ethics and alternative cultural

<sup>6</sup> Not to mention opening new alternative venues. This often takes place in semi-legal off-spaces, a development that is described by Jonathan Rouleau (2015) in the case of New York, but which is also visible in European cities like Hamburg and Berlin.

practice, the handling of changing conditions, and socio-spatial environments (Kuchar 2020). As local conditions and public support for the venues studied are quite specific to the research area, future research should challenge and further discuss these findings by taking other areas and clubs into account. Research is also urgently needed to examine a situation that only a short time ago was unimaginable: music venues in times of a pandemic. The impact of the changes inflicted by the pandemic on the live music sector could not be foreseen during the research period, but Covid-19 is clearly causing severe turmoil as the whole live music sector has been plunged into a crisis whose effects cannot yet be exactly measured. Initial observations indicate the standstill of most kinds of cultural performance will amplify the effects described above and likely increase dependence on substantial support by local and national cultural policymakers. Besides the question which parts of the live music sector will be able to even survive the pandemic, the situation under Covid-19 might accelerate structural change towards a new live music culture, as market share is already quite concentrated and the necessary capital unevenly balanced. In contrast, the more general economic crisis related to the pandemic might at the same time open up new opportunities regarding available spaces and new forms of solidarity.

## 6. Conclusions

Based on theoretical considerations encompassing current developments in the fields of cultural production, urban development and the live music sector, the three empirical case studies illustrate individual socio-spatial strategies between autonomy, dependence and subcultural institutionalization. The research in this article shows how alternative cultural production – especially in the spaces where DIY- and scene-related action culminates – are undergoing fundamental processes of negotiation.

Keeping in mind the lack of comprehensive research into scene-related music venues, the major contribution of the present project is insight into how originally DIY-driven performing spaces react to and handle changes in their socio-spatial environments. The introduction of three different trajectories of scene-related venues opens an arena for discourse about venues' present and future meanings as well as their physical and symbolic values within urban localities and the music industries.

Another interesting starting point for future research indicated in the empirical data is the policy of support and appreciation of alternative spaces by local authorities, leading to a convergence of alternative cultural spaces and traditional cultural institutions: mechanisms like the appreciation of cultural memory built by popular and even underground genres may play a role in this development. As most of the interviewees mention, this leads to an increasing competition among alternative spaces and concert halls for alternative popular artists (Nüske, 2017, 12; Knothe, Marek & Köster 2017, 13). This situation clearly implies that the position of popular culture is becoming increasingly established in the traditional field of the performing arts as well as in cultural policy, which needs further study.

Complementary to the scope of this project, which was primarily focused on venues as actors in alternative cultural networks, the perspective of scene and DIY-related audiences has much potential for gathering further knowledge about the value and roles of DIY-based venues within current music communities and their local environments. As current work on the core values of live music and formative musical experiences shows, aesthetic considerations as well as the sense

of belonging to a scene still seem to be a pivotal part of cultural participation and identity (Behr et al. 2014; Green 2016). Bringing together findings about venue strategies on the one hand and alternative audiences on the other might sharpen evidence and provide more detailed insights about possible future developments of collective processes related to the creation and participation in music. Especially now, as the Covid-19 pandemic challenges modes of cultural production and participation once taken for granted.

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- I2: Leif Nüske: Mojo Club 2017
- I3: Charlotte Knothe, Viktor Marek, Ralf Köster: Golden Pudel Club 2017
- I4: Rocko Schamoni: Founder Golden Pudel Club, 2017
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