“F*ck off Google”: protest against Google Campus Berlin

Google plans to implant a “Google Campus” in Kreuzberg, Berlin. We, as a decentralized network of people, want to keep our lives and spaces free from this law- and tax-evading company that is building a dystopian future. (FuckoffGoogle, 2018)

In November 2016, Google announced plans to rent a building in the trendy, multicultural Kreuzberg district of Berlin to open a Google Campus – a business incubator for tech start-ups, offering support, workshops and networking opportunities for entrepreneurs. But soon after the announcement, disaffected local communities organized several protests, asserting that “It’s extremely violent and arrogant of this mega-corporation, whose business model is based on mass surveillance and which speculates like crazy, to set up shop here,” according to a protest leader known by his alias, Larry Pageblank (Business Times, 2018). Berlin’s local government supported Google’s plan, yet Kreuzberg inhabitants’ fierce protests to combat gentrification and Google’s commercial exploitation of the neighborhood sought to reject its potentially huge impact on their privacy and lifestyle. In face of this challenge, was it still possible for Google to continue its plans in Berlin?

Berlin: a rising star in the start-up scene

In 2016, Berlin was a popular site for German start-ups, accounting for 17 percent of all German start-ups (Kollmann et al., 2016). A new tech start-up was being founded every 17 h in the city, with about 500 of them launching every year (Pretzell et al., 2018). The city offered various incubators, accelerators and co-working spaces, as well as good access to capital and financial support (see Figure E1). In addition, Berlin provided a safe city with high living standards, parks, low rental prices, a rich cultural and art scene, and people from diverse international backgrounds. Moreover, Berlin’s renowned universities contributed to the knowledge-intensive environment, and Germany maintained a stable legal and political system. Together, these features made Berlin highly attractive for creative, international entrepreneurs to set up shop, while also providing pull factors for recruiting employees (Teleport, 2015). Berlin’s start-ups thus took pride in their ecosystem and famously adopted an inclusive attitude, known as the “Berlin Spirit” (Dörner, 2016). All of these elements were pertinent to Google’s 2016 plan to open a Campus in Berlin.

Google campus: a breeding ground for entrepreneurs

The “Google for Entrepreneurs” project was designed particularly to promote technology start-ups. It revolved around Google Campuses, which feature connecting spaces that seek to bring together like-minded problem solvers and provide facilitative conditions for entrepreneurs (see Figure E2) (Google, 2019).

When Google chose the city for a new Campus, Berlin’s politicians were optimistic. The city’s mayor Michael Müller viewed the plans as an opportunity, calling it “an important day for Berlin” (Álvarez, 2016). Local politicians also expressed their hope that Google, as a
successful company, would invest in growing neighborhoods, spur digitalization of the city, and help link the city’s scientific institutions and businesses (Lock, 2018). As it moved forward with the plan, Google chose the vibrant Kreuzberg neighborhood, known for its creative, diverse culture and unconventional scene, filled with entrepreneurs and artists. In 2016, Google started renting a building in the heart of Kreuzberg and preparing for the Campus opening, initially scheduled for 2017. The project would hire six to ten Google employees, with room for around 20 start-ups (Lock, 2018). The pieces thus were in place for a fruitful cooperation between Google and Berlin, but there was one thing nobody had reckoned with: the residents of Kreuzberg!

Kreuzberg: a special neighborhood?

Berlin’s Kreuzberg district has long been renowned for its art scene, student spirit, environmentalism, underground nightlife and radical political activism. In addition, the neighborhood’s strong sense of community has prompted highly invested efforts to protect the local ecosystem. Inhabitants were proud to call themselves “Kreuzbergers.” The area is only 10.38 km² in size[1], yet its increasing popularity has led to greater population density and soaring rents (Table E1 and Figure E3), such that “The problem of rising rents and lack of living space is one of the most important issues for Berlin,” according to Petra Rohland, a spokesperson for the city’s Department of Urban Development and Housing. The Kreuzbergers, known for their liberal, left-minded political attitudes, have responded to these developments by forming activist groups and coalitions that work to address issues surrounding gentrification, displacement and the privatization of public space (Wilder, 2017).

Google: caught in the battle against gentrification and displacement

When Google decided to open its campus in Kreuzberg, it added fuel to the fiery debate about gentrification, rents, and displacement of small shops and inventive businesses, which has long been integral to Kreuzberg’s culture (Business Times, 2018; Marcus, 2019). Protesters argued that Google Campus would spur these negative developments, possibly leading to a situation like that in San Francisco, where extreme poverty and technology wealth live side by side (Badger, 2018). Protesters perceived that the multinational corporation would kill off their very identity, threatening the loss of their individualistic lifestyle and start-up scene through a profit-oriented restructuring of the neighborhood (FuckoffGoogle, 2018). They also noted that Google’s business model conflicts with the liberal, progressive and creative spirit of Kreuzberg. People were particularly suspicious of the company’s collection and monetization of personal data, reflecting previous critiques of Google’s data protection policies. Finally, protestors highlighted news reports of Google’s tax evasion and mass surveillance practices (Lock, 2018).

This distrust in the company and its ethics, combined with the ongoing fight against gentrification, led to fierce protests targeting the Google Campus. The multiple campaigns included animated Twitter activity and the creation of online platforms such as “fuckoffgoogle.com” (Lock, 2018). In 2018, protestors even occupied the area where the Campus was planned, prompting their arrest by local authorities (Greene, 2018). Confronted with such opposition, Google had no choice but to postpone the opening of its Campus.

The Google Campus initiative promised to bring benefits and modernization to Berlin’s vibrant start-up scene; the inhabitants of Kreuzberg instead regarded its entry as interference by what they viewed as a questionably ethical, multinational company. So what should Google have done in the short term to handle the protests? Should it continue to pursue its strategy and open a Google Campus in Kreuzberg?

Note

1. Note: 1 km² = 0.38 sq. miles.
References


Further reading


Exhibit 1

Figure E1 Fact sheet Berlin

Berlin

- German FOUNDER CAPITAL with 40,000 business registrations and more than 500 foundations per year (Source: BusinessLocationCenter (2018))
- Some examples of successful Berlin-based start-ups:
  - Zalando
  - ImmobilienScout 24
  - N26
- 90% of the start-ups in Berlin rated their location with “rather good” or “very good” (Source: PwC (2015))
- Berlin being home to numerous VENTURE CAPITALISTS, 47% of the venture capital investments in 2015 were investments in Berlin-based start-ups (Source: Kahl et al. (2016))
- Every 10th foundation in Berlin and every 7th new job in Berlin emerges in the field of DIGITAL ECONOMY (Source: Pretzell et al. (2018))

Wide selection of SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS including incubators, co-working spaces, legal support and regional support programs

EMBASSIES OF 158 STATES are situated in Berlin

CENTER OF GERMANY’S POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING: Residence of the German executive house in the Chancellery, German Parliament called Bundestag and the Bundesrat, representing the Federal States

Germany is part of the EUROPEAN UNION and subject to EU-wide regulations

Germany has a strict data privacy law and strong employee rights

With 5,000 DEMONSTRATIONS in 2017, Berlin can be called the German protest capital (Source: BerlinerZeitung (2017))

The airports Schönefeld and Tegel handled 33.3 MILLION PASSENGERS in 2017 (Source: Berlin Airport (2018))

Good train connection to all major German cities and good inner-city public transport

Intersection of European transport routes

Home of 39 UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES

Highest density of RESEARCHERS AND ACADEMICS in Germany (Source: Berlin.de (2018, 2019))

Source: Icons obtained from Microsoft Office
Google for Startups

Mission
- Provide FINANCIAL SUPPORT
- Offer FREE TRAININGS and mentoring
- Provide HUBS (supportive community, access to critical resources, work on ideas)
- Accompany founders through their START UP JOURNEY

“Each Campus…
- Has WORKSPACES, COMMUNITY EVENT SPACES, CLASSROOMS, AND CAFES for teams
- Joins Google for Startups GLOBAL NETWORK of tech hubs
- Brings growth-stage start-ups the best of GOOGLE’S PRODUCTS, CONNECTIONS, AND BEST PRACTICES
- Focus on technological start-ups

We're passionate about HELPING STARTUPS succeed

“We believe in the convening POWER OF PHYSICAL SPACE.”

“That’s why we build Campuses: gathering places for innovators to SHARE IDEAS, LEARN from each other, and support their LOCAL ECOSYSTEM.”

“We’re passionate about HELPING STARTUPS succeed”

3,952 new jobs created by Campus startups worldwide in 2017
Source: Google (2017a)

>$255m funds raised by Campus startups worldwide in 2017
Source: Google (2017b)

“Campus has broadened my horizons as an entrepreneur—it opened my eyes to everything I didn’t know but needed to. It really fosters your growth, and meeting people from all walks of life adds to that.”
Karan Shanmugarajah, Founder of WealthKernel

Source: Google (2019). Icons are obtained from Microsoft Office and Pixabay
Figure E3  Net rent per m² in 2017, by Borough

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Borough</th>
<th>Net rent per m²</th>
<th>Change compared to 2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mitte</td>
<td>€11.8</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treptow-Köpenick</td>
<td>€9.0</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tempelhof-Schöneberg</td>
<td>€9.7</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf</td>
<td>€7.3</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marzahn-Heinersdorf</td>
<td>€7.3</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinickendorf</td>
<td>€8.6</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spandau</td>
<td>€8.0</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berlin</td>
<td>€9.8</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg</td>
<td>€11.7</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lichtenberg</td>
<td>€9.1</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steglitz-Zehlendorf</td>
<td>€9.8</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pankow</td>
<td>€10.1</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neukölln</td>
<td>€9.8</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 1 m² (m²) = 10.76 sq. feet
Source: The authors’ figure, based on data from BerlinHyp (2018)

Table E1  Population profiles 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Berlin</th>
<th>Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>3,670,622</td>
<td>281,323 (7.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population with migration background</td>
<td>1,151,732</td>
<td>115,370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population with migration background in percentage</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age</td>
<td>42.7 years</td>
<td>37.8 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average monthly salary</td>
<td>€1,175</td>
<td>€1,175</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *A person has a migration background if they or at least one parent does not have German citizenship
Source: The authors’ figures, based on data from Berlin.de (2017)
Exhibit 2. Case-related YouTube videos

Many videos related to the issues contained in this case are available on YouTube; a selected list is shown in Table E2. A short video such as “Campus TelAviv” can help students obtain a better understanding of the work done on other Google Campuses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Video</th>
<th>URL</th>
<th>Duration (minutes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Campus TelAviv</td>
<td>Google Campus TelAviv</td>
<td><a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbmBmbPcYhk">www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbmBmbPcYhk</a></td>
<td>1.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus London</td>
<td>Google for Entrepreneurs: Campus London</td>
<td><a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eL_APnjE_PA">www.youtube.com/watch?v=eL_APnjE_PA</a></td>
<td>2.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residency Program</td>
<td>Google for Start-ups Residency</td>
<td><a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&amp;v=oxLz4H1IRqzU">www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&amp;v=oxLz4H1IRqzU</a></td>
<td>2.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative by the Activists fighting Google in Berlin</td>
<td>Who owns Berlin? “F*** off Google” (trailer)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ARMh72EtelE">www.youtube.com/watch?v=ARMh72EtelE</a></td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative by the Activists fighting Google in Berlin</td>
<td>Who owns Berlin? “F*** off Google” (Part 1)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PXwV7mULts&amp;t=110s">www.youtube.com/watch?v=PXwV7mULts&amp;t=110s</a></td>
<td>8.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative by the Activists fighting Google in Berlin</td>
<td>Who owns Berlin? “F*** off Google” (Part 2)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oW7Z08E9t3WU">www.youtube.com/watch?v=oW7Z08E9t3WU</a></td>
<td>8.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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