ON DEMOCRATIC FUTURES

Sandy Kaltenborn
Rahel Süß

In his presentation "Kotti & Co – Multilayer Protest and the Role of Design in Urban Conflicts", Alexander Sandy Kaltenborn presents the work of Kotti & Co, an urban and housing policy initiative founded in 2011 at Berlin's Kottbusser Tor. The initiative aimed to highlight the pressing issues of rising rents, advocate for accessible social housing, and campaign for the return of privatized housing to public ownership. Operating in a highly diverse urban space, Kotti & Co became a focal point for addressing the contradictions of Berlin's urban development policies.

A core focus of the talk is on the development and implementation of a multilayer protest. This approach combined multiple strategies, including design and media campaigns, the creation of narrative frameworks, and active community participation. The initiative employed various tools to engage a wide array of audiences: from the local neighborhood to political decision-makers, the media, and broader civil society. This multifaceted strategy aimed to build visibility, foster public discourse, and generate enduring networks to support its goals.

Kaltenborn explores how design plays a pivotal role in shaping the protest. He specifically addresses the concept of aesthetic distinctions, reflecting on how design choices can both include and exclude audiences. By examining how certain visual languages resonate with specific groups while alienating others, he emphasizes the need to carefully balance professional design standards with accessibility. This highlights a critical tension in the protest: the challenge of creating visual messages that appeal to political stakeholders and media while remaining inclusive and relatable to the diverse local community.

Participation and community care work are also central themes in Sandy's work. Kotti & Co viewed protest not just as a political act but as a deeply social process. The initiative invested significant effort in fostering dialogue, building relationships, and creating spaces where individuals could co-develop strategies and solutions. Time and care were crucial components, reflecting a commitment to building long-term social cohesion and empowerment.

SANDY (ALEXANDER PAUL OMAR ABDULLAH) KALTENBORN (*Essen, Germany) is a communication designer and artist with Afghan-German roots. He studied communication design at the Kunsthochschule Berlin-Weißensee and founded the design studio image-shift (visual communication & other misunderstandings) in 1999, known for its socially and politically engaged projects. Kaltenborn is a co-founder of Kotti & Co, an urban and housing policy initiative in Berlin. His design approach combines (communication) design with social issues, conflicts, urban participation, and the promotion of critical perspectives on design and communication.

RAHEL SÜß is a political scientist and philosopher exploring desirable democratic and digital futures. Her work engages with key questions, including what a more empowered democracy might look like, the role of everyday democratic experiences, and the link between anxiety and democracy. Combining insights from political philosophy, social theory, and social psychology, she investigates how transformative change can be envisioned and realized. Rahel contributed to the award-winning ARD documentary Der Autokraten-Code (2024), exploring AI and autocracy.

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Kaltenborn underscores that the multilayer protest of Kotti & Co illustrates how design can function as both a practical tool and a process for negotiating urban conflicts. The initiative serves as an example of how design, social practices, and political activism can intersect to create impactful change. By addressing issues of participation, inclusion, and exclusion, Kotti & Co highlights the potential of design as a critical medium for fostering inclusivity, shaping urban narratives, and challenging systemic inequities.

Political scientist and philosopher Rahel Süß is a researcher in residence with The Esch Clinics project during November and December 2024, and will be a respondent to Sandy's talk.



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