

BMW, Guggenheim open Berlin design 'lab' after threats

June 15 2012, by Deborah Cole

German automaker BMW and New York's Guggenheim Museum opened an urban design "laboratory" in Berlin Friday after protests by angry residents of a trendy district forced them to a new location.

The BMW Guggenheim Lab, which is on a tour of cities around the globe, had been scheduled to arrive on a vacant lot in the lively Kreuzberg area of the German capital for a two-month stint before continuing on to Mumbai.

But organisers pulled the plug in March after several threats of vandalism blamed on residents angry that the Lab could spur on the sharp rise in local rents and who protested at BMW's use of slave labour during [World War II](#).

Organisers said they worked to address some of the concerns at the new site in the upscale Prenzlauer Berg district of the former communist east, which has seen rapid gentrification in the two decades since the Berlin Wall fell.

"It is fantastic that we have been talking about gentrification, about rising rents, about the use of the river in the city (even) before we opened," said curator Maria Nicanor of the Guggenheim.

"It's not like this topic came right now, it's a topic that is important in every city in the world. I think that if we can keep having a meaningful conversation about that, that will turn into a positive thing."

The row over the site has been heated in cash-strapped Berlin, which has a paltry industrial base and has looked to culture and tourism to power an [economic recovery](#).

Berlin ranks as one of Europe's most affordable cities but has seen a steep increase in property prices since the Cold War ended.

"I can understand that when you think about how fast Berlin developed, and when you consider that Berlin lived in a kind of cocoon before, and everyone feels how rents have got more expensive, that there are reactions like this," said another organiser, Corinne Rose, about the initial opposition.

"I think it is good that citizens care about their city, identify with it and fight for it. I hope the discussion can continue now about the issues and not the protests."

Mayor Klaus Wowereit, who famously called the German capital "poor but sexy", got personally involved in efforts to ensure the project could still launch in Berlin.

The Lab, which calls itself a forum to discuss urban architecture, technology and sustainability, will remain open until July 29 at Pfefferberg, a sprawling former brewery that already hosts artists' studios, galleries and restaurants.

It is based in a purpose-built "pod" atrium designed by a Japanese architecture firm and will also feature free workshops on DIY projects -- including solar coffee roasters and electricity-generating swing sets, as well as cycling in the city, ageing and the future of urban life.

The project plans to visit nine cities in six years. Its opening in New York last August also met with anti-gentrification protests.

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