

Origin of an Idea

Berlin is a city with a large international population. Among the 3.4 million inhabitants of the German capital 450.000 do not have the German citizen-ship. Many more have a mixed ethnic background.

The idea of a carnival which presents the cultural and ethnic diversity of Berlin was developed in 1995, i.e. at a time when – as a consequence to the political and economic changes since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the unification of the two German states – a lot of social, economic and cultural changes happened. Due to these changes, to the economic decline of Berlin and the different economic levels and social and cultural experiences of people in East and West Berlin, social conflicts became more evident and even increased. This state of change resulted, among other things, in a biased and prejudiced view on immigration, which was reflected in the public discussion.

At the same period of time, Berlin attracted a growing number of artists from all over the world and a new cultural off-scene developed, which added to the cultural richness of Berlin. Berlin developed into one of Europe's music centres with a focus on different styles of electronically generated music.

There had been attempts to initiate a carnival in Berlin in the past. Those concepts which had been based on already existing patterns, like the carnival in Rio or the Notting Hill Carnival in London, did not gain sufficient support and could not be implemented in Berlin.

With the concept of a carnival which focussed on the cultural richness of Berlin, also highlighting the often hidden treasures of its international cultural scene, the Carnival of Cultures was the concept that was a success from the start.

The idea was adopted by organizers in Bielefeld and Hamburg. Both cities celebrate their Carnivals of Cultures every year, based on the concept of the event in Berlin, yet still charmingly different.

Werkstatt der Kulturen (WdK) – the organizing body

In the late 80ies the former Mayor of Berlin, Richard von Weizsäcker, and the Commissioner for Foreigners' Affairs, Barbara John developed the idea for an institution open to all cultural, religious and social communities and groups in Berlin. Due to their joint efforts the "Werkstatt der Kulturen (WdK)" was founded in 1993 as a forum for cultural multiplicity and a catalyst for intercultural exchange. Its aim was, and still is, to provide a culturally and politically non-discriminating platform for artists, intellectuals and independent organisations.

The WdK supports numerous projects aiming at the expansion of cultural activities and the promotion of intercultural communication. Simultaneously, it offers professional working spaces for music, dance, theatre and literature and is the organizing body for the world music contest "Creole-Weltmusik aus Berlin und Brandenburg" and the festival of traditional dance "Bewegte Welten".

The WdK is the initiator and organizer of the Carnival of Cultures in Berlin (Karneval der Kulturen Berlin) which took place for the first time in 1996.

About Carnival in general

Carnival is one of the oldest celebrations in the world. It developed in ancient Europe, then travelled to the Caribbean, South-America and Africa in colonial times

and finally – centuries later – sent back impulses to a culturally, socially and demographically changed Europe. These changed circumstances heavily influenced many contemporary urban carnivals today, making a strong point of the cultural expressions and aesthetic visions of migrants.

Carnival is a popular event that questions everyday life and politics. It stands for an inversion of hierarchy as well as for the proud presentation of a people's identity. Carnival is a combined art form that embraces many aspects of artistic expression.

Due to the global migration currents, many contemporary carnivals are multi-faceted and of mixed styles.

Today's carnivals all over the world attract millions of participants and spectators thus having a positive impact on local economies.

The development of the Carnival of Cultures

After only six months of active preparation, the parade of the first Carnival of Cultures took place on May 16th, 1996. 50.000 visitors came to see the parade consisting of 2.200 performers accompanied by about 50 colourfully decorated floats. The enthusiastic reaction of the public and the media made clear that the carnival was a great success. This event created a new awareness for Berlin's cultural richness with an emphasis on the strong impact made by its ethnic communities.

In 1997 – the second carnival year – a street festival was added to the programme. In the same year, the first Childrens Carnival was celebrated. Since 1997 the Carnival of Cultures takes place over the Whitsun (Pentecost) weekend as a four-day celebration.

Over the last nine years, the numbers of participants and visitors have risen continuously. In 2005, 1.5 million visitors celebrated at the street festival and the parade. 4.500 professional and non-professional performers of all age groups took part in the parade on Whitsunday, accompanied by 70-plus colourfully decorated floats. 900 artists performed during the four-day street festival.

The Carnival of Cultures is open to everybody and all forms of cultural expression. It is regarded as a platform for a proud expression of hybrid cultural identities, containing traditional and contemporary elements. It includes and attracts all age groups, professional artists and amateurs, people from all walks of life.

Living with two cultures: Immigrants in the carnival

The Carnival of Cultures is of special importance to Berlin's ethnic communities. They see it as a challenge and an incentive to reconsider their view on the culture in their respective country of origin and define their cultural self-image "between two cultures".

The involvement in carnival activities strengthens the bonds within ethnic communities and among all the groups alike. Their presence in the national and international media lead to a growing self-esteem within ethnic communities. Therefore, the Carnival of Cultures promotes the awareness for the positive impact made by immigrants on Berlin's cultural and social life.

Young people in the Carnival

Large numbers of young people are involved in carnival activities, many of them

coming from multi-ethnic or difficult social and economic backgrounds. While participating in the preparation for the carnival, many of them develop a level of commitment and reliability most unusual in their daily life.

Many bands from Berlin's wide-ranging live and electronic music scene as well as theatre and art groups add their aesthetic visions to this sensual and joyful celebration.

Berlin's Carnival has been inspired by modern European carnivals like the Notting Hill Carnival in London and the Rotterdam Zomercarnaval. It has taken in elements of many traditional carnivals and celebrations from all over the world. By being open to cultural rites, customs and traditions it attracts performers from countries without carnival traditions. The inclusion of all these elements makes the Carnival of Cultures in Berlin quite unique.

Carnival Art

By inviting numerous associations, institutions and individuals in Berlin – among them theatres and arts schools, youth and community clubs and ethnic associations, individual artists, musicians, bands and DJs – the WdK built a network of carnival activists which was and still is the basis for the Carnival of Cultures.

From the beginning on, it encouraged a discussion on the adaption of elements immanent to carnival, including music, dance, masks, theatrical elements, performance and crafts.

The WdK provides the participants with workshop facilities for the preparation of costumes, masks and decorative elements for the floats. By doing so, it offers the groups a chance to meet and discuss their artistic concepts and means of implementation.

The artistic quality of the group presentations has been stimulated and increased by the introduction of a competition during the parade in the fourth carnival year, 1999. Prizes are awarded to the best carnival groups, floats and youth groups thereby encouraging the development of all aspects of carnival.

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