CIRCE

Nepo Schrade

Greening on the Verge: A starter-kit for community-led public realm interventions in Berlin

Contents

A. Summary

Greening on the Verge: A Starter Kit for Community-Led Public Realm Interventions in Berlin leverages insights from research on climate justice and urban planning to empower black and brown communities disproportionately affected by the climate crisis in Berlin to take up space and implement interventions in the urban landscape. To do so, this CIRCE project required a pivot from what was initially planned to be a comprehensive, but dense "toolkit" to an accessible "starter kit." This shift prioritizes practical, entry-level actions and information on the urgency and rootedness of such interventions to empower members of these communities and overcome barriers to involvement. Being formatted as a brochure in the form of a rectangular 9-panel reveal, the output of the project communicates these priorities through three sections: *1. Highlighting the urgency,* which focuses on background information *2. Following the footsteps*, which outlines historic role models and urban greening initiatives by black and brown communities and *3. Transforming space,* which includes practical starting points and guidance for public realm interventions for three different categories of interventions: planting, foraging, and (information) sharing. The starter kit was then made available for free in spaces relevant to these communities throughout the city. Ultimately, this project was an exercise in employing creativity to make the most of everyday opportunities for participation in the public realm, bringing together community-building activities and actions that create both more just and greener cities.

B. Problem and evidence

The CIRCE project *Greening on the Verge: A Starter Kit for Community-Led Public Realm Interventions in Berlin* represented an opportunity for me to put into practice my previous research on the intersection of climate justice, urban heat islands, and urban planning.

In researching and writing the literature review for my 2020 M.Sc. dissertation, titled *Climate Justice Implications of Planning Responses to Urban Heat Islands: London and Berlin* (Schrade, 2020), one aspect particularly jumped out to me: in some areas of the world that are already experiencing extreme heat, studies have found a direct willingness by residents to pay more for living in cooler parts of the city (Klaiber et al., 2017). As black and brown people are already disproportionally affected by the climate crisis on both the global and local level, it can thus be inferred that the climatic conditions residents are exposed to will continue to be synergistically socially stratified as the climate crisis worsens. In Berlin, specifically, studies of residents' vulnerability to climate impacts have demonstrated that they are concentrated in Wedding, Neukölln, and Moabit (Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung, Bauen und Wohnen, 2024) – which are also the areas with the highest concentration of black and brown people and people without German citizenship in the city.
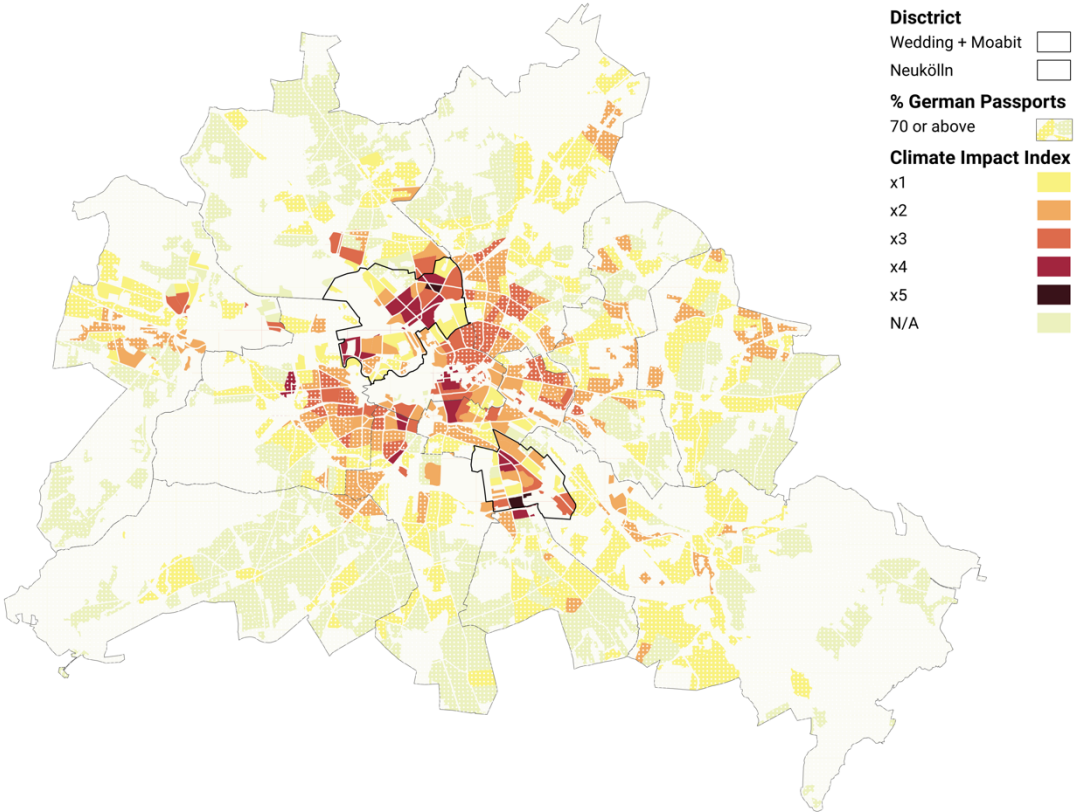

Figure 1. Mapping of exposure to climate impacts indices and demographic data in Berlin. Using datasets by Statistisches Bundesamt and the Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung, Bauen, und Wohnen.

Poignantly, urban planning and design interventions aimed at addressing overheating, such as the creation of new green spaces, often lead to gentrification themselves by increasing the desirability of an area and alienating existing residents – a phenomenon that has been described as 'green gentrification' (Gould & Lewis, 2017). These dynamics therefore mean that, in European cities, marginalised communities are subjected to a vicious cycle when it comes to the impacts of the climate crisis, fundamentally representing a climate justice issue.

Few models for redressing this dynamic exist. One of them is the "just green enough" approach. This framework proposes neighbourhood scale, community-led interventions to increase greening and biodiversity, as opposed to more formal, prestigious projects, which are likely to contribute to outpricing and alienation. Encouragingly, the researchers argue that these kinds of under-the-radar spatial greening interventions can challenge the presumed inevitability of gentrification, while fostering the sense of ownership, diversity, and democracy needed to ensure residents can remain rooted in their neighbourhoods (Curran & Hamilton, 2017). Adding further urgency to this approach, much recent planning theory research has focused on the decline of "third places," or spaces and circumstances in which people meet or spend time in that are not related to their work or home life (Kanosvamhira, 2024). This especially affects places that do not require consuming a product and spending money, a dynamic that is also connected to increased levels of isolation and loneliness experienced in urban areas, and which, by extension, hampers opportunities for creative and cultural output and collaboration.

While the impetus for the project is therefore clear, there are numerous challenges associated with testing and implementing the "just green enough" approach to address these problems in practice. Firstly, just as black and brown people are often excluded from formal planning processes shaping the immediate built and natural environment, there are many barriers for members of these groups to participating in activities such as foraging (Landor-Yamagata et al., 2018), gardening, or taking up space in the public realm in general in Berlin (Stoetzer, 2018). Ultimately, greening or gardening can be seen as belonging to another world, which remains inaccessible due to social exclusion and often comparatively limited resources. Further, based on anecdotal evidence, established BIPOC groups engaging with projects in the public realm, particularly in an international, high-fluctuation city like Berlin, can appear to be reserved for those who are already connected and initiated or have prior subject-matter knowledge to fall back on. The challenge for the project therefore became offering a starting point and finding a way to make participation in public realm interventions accessible to members of marginalised communities in Berlin.

C. Journey

The project's journey is best illustrated through a small change I made to its title. While it was initially envisioned as *Greening on the Verge: A toolkit for community-led public realm interventions in Berlin*, about halfway through the process, I reframed the project as a *starter kit* to more directly address the problems outlined above. While this change may seem minor, it was informed and preceded by various experiences, interactions, and reflections made possible by my participation in the CIRCE project and significantly shaped the content and tone of the final document. It represents a long process of finding ways to maximalise the impact of the project and a re-focus on adding value.

At the outset, the concept for the project envisioned creating a toolkit for BIPOC residents that would assist in "identifying, appropriating, and greening suitable spaces in Berlin, such as verges and underused plots, sustainably and in coordination with public authorities." The idea was to outline all the steps required to, for example, adopt and tend to a piece of underused land or green verge in the city with complete legal certainty. The project would also directly respond to the administrative hurdles that are so prevalent in everyday life and that, in themselves, often serve to alienate marginalized communities.

However, the motivation for eventually reframing the project as a starter kit appeared early in the process. Conversations and workshops at the first CIRCE fellowship summit often centred around possibilities for scaling our projects. This was a difficult topic for me to engage with, as the nature of the "just green enough" approach, outlined in the previous section, is to stay under the radar and remain hyper-local to avoid triggering gentrification. However, these discussions led me to think about what the toolkit might look like if it were adopted for another setting, such as a different city entirely. This thought process proved to be the first indication that I might have to adjust course, as I realized that, in a different environment, a toolkit may be less preoccupied with clearing administrative hurdles—a laborious and rather uninspiring process—and instead focus on exciting methods and places through which people can become involved in greening public spaces and make lasting impacts. In other words, in another setting, creative practices might not be as stifled by processes and regulations. I had to find a way to impart a similarly inspiring flexibility and freedom in my project.

Further fuelling these initial doubts, additional research revealed that a significant amount of guidance on how to implement greening projects in the city already exist (*Begrünung von Baumscheiben - Aber Richtig! Kleiner Leitfaden Für Die Ökologische Bepflanzung von Baumscheiben*, 2024; *Der Garten von Nebenan: Leitfaden Zur Begrünung Im Öffentlichen Raum*, 2014). This sparked the question where my project can fit in, and if it would bring

something new to the table or just re-package existing information. However, as these guidance documents are often lengthy and inaccessible, as well as only available in German, the initial conclusion was that there would still be value in re-organising and revamping this existing guidance to tailor it for marginalised communities in the city. In particular, the though was that, by combining historical information on the rich legacy and tradition of black and brown urban gardeners, as well as information on the urgency of climate justice in Berlin, important threads could be merged to create a compelling and valuable toolkit. However, there was still an underlying sense that this approach would not fully address the challenges and problems set out in the previous section.

Due to these calibration processes, it was difficult to identify, articulate or let alone implement a larger pivot immediately. During the initial project phase, I therefore spend much time mapping out the toolkit's possible sections and their order. As outlined in my proposal, I planned to create a printed document that would be available for free in relevant places, like community centres, meeting, and event spaces, cafes, book shops, and barbershops across the city. However, I had not determined its final format and struggled with figuring out ways to create an accessible, appealing toolkit that conveys important information without becoming too dense or text heavy.

It was my own creative practices and community engagement that would finally enable me to envisage a project output that would truly address the problems I had identified. Through participating in the CIRCE fellowship, I felt emboldened to pro-actively seek out connections, projects and activists concerned with climate justice, public realm interventions, and urban gardening. I thereby came across a community farming retreat close to Berlin, with about thirty participants, which was hosted by the black-owned aloti farm e.V., in collaboration with the Climate Justice Berlin Collective and partly funded by BUND-Jugend. Besides learning about running a farm and tending to land, the organisers of the retreat explicitly offered opportunities to participants for discussing, workshopping, and sharing about their ongoing projects. Through this format, I was able to gain valuable input and suggestions from folks that are involved in climate justice projects and initiatives, with participants actively reflecting about the possible content and approach of my project. These interactions made it clear that my CIRCE project would offer the most value and impact if I could find ways to turn it into a starter kit, rather than my initial plans for an all-encompassing (and potentially inaccessible) toolkit.

If the starter kit could empower folks in the black and brown community by making different methods of urban greening interventions accessible in different settings – be it as part of an established group or individually – these small suggestions could grow into lasting spatial practices and involvement, a weekend of making seeds bombs, or simply sharing information

about the environment with other people during a conversation. As described in the document itself:

This toolkit documents the author's journey of putting into action a feeling of urgency to address the climate injustices in the city and to begin planting seeds – but not knowing where best to start. Traditional means of delivering public realm interventions often lead to prestige projects that alienate existing residents and gentrify neighbourhoods. Therefore, the methods set out on the inside of the pamphlet are intended to function as starting points, or *rogue interventions.*

These interventions can be undertaken as individuals or small groups in your neighbourhoods without requiring a formal structure or joining an established group. However, … they have the potential to empower, to grow into more or less regular activities, or even become formalised and influence city policies. There is no one way to resist.

Finally, my CIRCE mentor's advice to "just get started with the document itself" proved invaluable. Their reassurance that the necessary content would become clear as I worked through the process made all the difference. Despite further delays due to illness and changes in my day job, by early September, I had settled on the document's format and could finally begin filling it with content.

Figure 2. Final prototype of the rectangular 9-panel reveal. DIN-A3, tracing paper.

Following extensive research into possible formats for the document and numerous iterations, I decided on a rectangular 9-panel reveal. This would allow me to convey information in a visually appealing way and lends itself well to a toolkit, as the format offers an inherent sense of discovery. The creative process of designing the document in this manner was hugely aided by my experience as an urban designer, which also involves considering how information can best be communicated visually.

For the first circulation, 30 copies were printed on weather-resistant paper. Subsequently, they were individually cut and folded to create the rectangular 9-panel reveal. These were then distributed by displaying them and making them available for free in spaces relevant to black and brown communities in Berlin – particularly in the neighbourhoods that are most affected by climate impact indices. So far, these spaces include community centres, cafes and restaurants, bookshops, and art spaces. To facilitate this process and invite people to pick up the document, the design of the cover of the toolkit includes blocky, noticeable and colourful text for the title and subtitle, as well as a simple hand-drawn diagram that invites a second glance and illustrates the purpose of the toolkit.
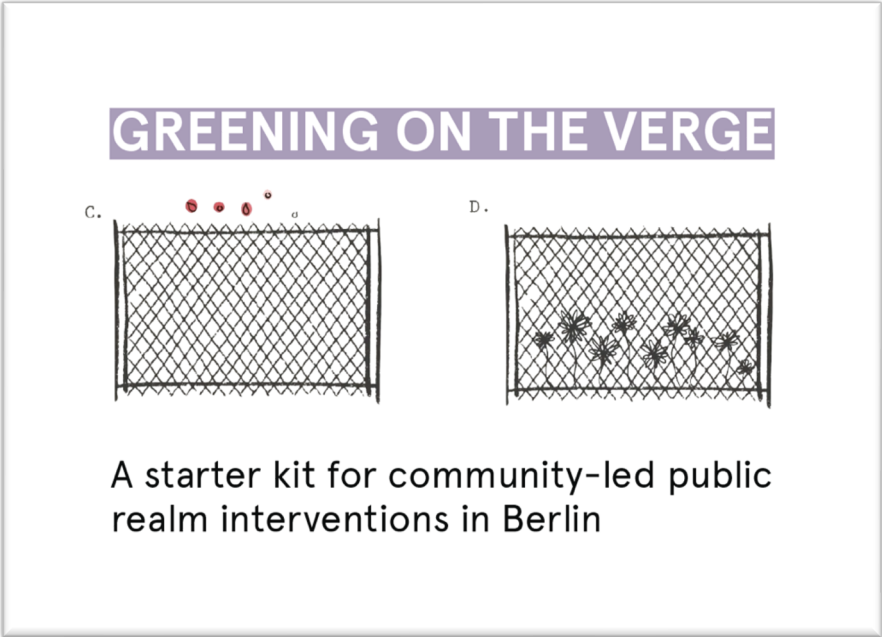

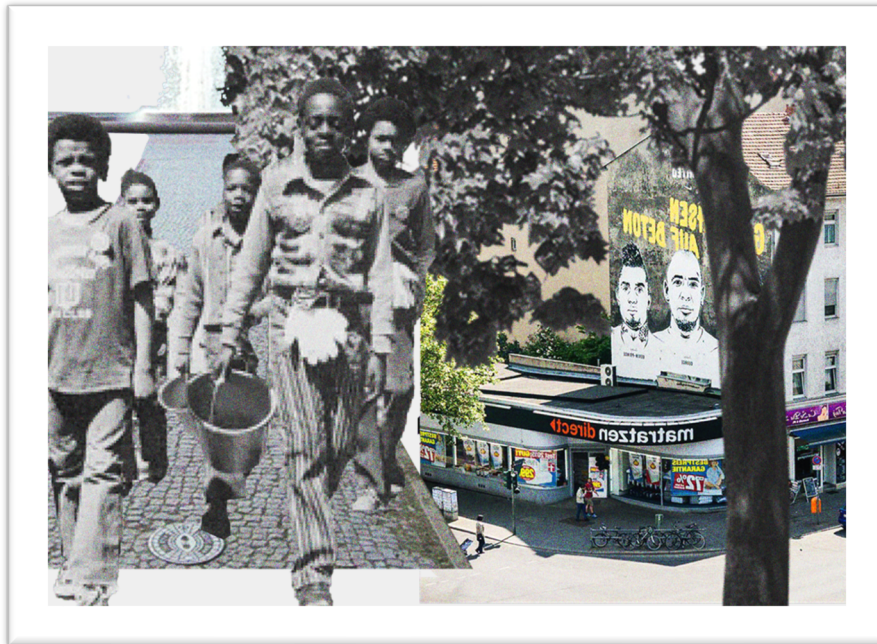Figure 3. Cover design of the document. 13.5 x 9.5 cm.

Figure 4. Back cover design of the document. 13.5 x 9.5cm

The back cover, meanwhile, shows an artistic collage that has been designed to have the impact of on one hand, signalling to members of the black and brown communities in Berlin that the document was created mainly for these communities, as well as commenting on city policies by juxtaposing the well-maintained Viktoria Luise Platz square in Schöneberg/Charlottenburg juxtaposed with Badstraße in Wedding, which evidently experiences underinvestment. The collage reflects, however, that despite this underinvestment, meaningful and powerful community infrastructure has been established and is continually being expanded.

In terms of the content, I settled on three main section that would structure the document:

1. **Highlighting the urgency** – the section illustrates the urgency of climate (in) justice in Berlin, using a mapping (created by collating and designing spatial and demographic data using the mapping programme QGIS) of Berlin's neighbourhoods and their climate vulnerability overlaid with demographic information, as well as a textual explication of the issue.
2. **Following the footsteps** – this section focusses on historical role models, specifically Liz Christy and Hattie Carthan, as they illustrate different, but equally effective approaches to public realm interventions by black and brown communities.
3. **Transforming space** – the main section of the document, setting the scope for the starter kit and including practical guidance and starting points for three different categories of interventions: planting, foraging, and (information) sharing.

Collectively, these three sections and the format of the starter kit are intended to address the problems and challenges outlined at the beginning of the report – especially the barriers to participating in public realm interventions and greening and gardening projects, which black and brown people face in urban areas. To achieve this, the first two sections have a foundational function. First, by illustrating why not only the toolkit, but also the methods and interventions outlined within it are sorely needed. Secondly, by invoking past examples that had a transformative effect on city landscape and, most importantly, showing that black and brown people have long played a pivotal role in urban greening efforts. Both sections are accompanied by photographs and illustrations to ensure that the content remains accessible and appealing and to avoid creating a text-heavy document.

For the third section, I similarly deliberately chose to use simple hand-sketches to illustrate the different methods of intervention. These were chosen based on the aforementioned research about greening and foraging in Berlin, reflecting and workshopping the project in the context of the aloti e.V. farming retreat, and in order to cover a large range of interventions that may appeal to folks in various circumstances. Each of the methods received a score in terms of tools and knowledge required, as well barriers present (legal or otherwise). Finally, a small section of the toolkit discusses places where these interventions might be successfully implemented and points to a QR code leading to a Linktree where I provide links to further detailed instructions, tips and background information regarding each of the suggested interventions. The hope is that small-scale interventions, such as seed grenading, planting and maintaining tree bases, or foraging for herbs or food can be started, repeated, and inspire confidence and further local involvement.

This approach also harks back to the initial impetus for the project, which set out to put research into practice. As mentioned, the Just Green Enough approach, which intends to secure green, cooler neighbourhoods while avoiding the gentrification effects often caused by prestigious and eye-catching landscape architecture and mobility projects, relies on small-scale, neighbourhood-led interventions to, on one hand, garner the involvement of local residents and, secondly, fly under the radar while enabling transformative impacts.

D. Impact

While much of the project's impacts are difficult to gauge at this stage, there are several measures and milestones that show that its main objectives have been reached and, most importantly, that the ground is set for further development of both the concrete project, as well as the ideas that served as inspiration for it. Additionally, having the license to engage with these topics within the framework of the CIRCE project has had a significant and expandable community-building effect for me, revolving around the topics of urban gardening

and foraging. These developments and connections are enabling me to critically engage with and gather additional perspectives for my work and research. In a way, the starter kit's goal of allowing folks to become involved and to be enabled to shape the urban environment at different scales and in different settings is mirrored in my personal experience of carrying out the CIRCE project.

The most direct metric in assessing the impact of the project is the number of starter kits distributed. At the time of writing, this figure stands at 30 copies, with plans to print, cut, fold, and distribute a new batch, as the first wave has already largely been collected. Continuing gathering information on the rate of collection of start kits will serve as a base indication for the project's impact potential in the future (as well as signifying when further print circulations are needed).

In order to increase the short-term impact and spread awareness about the project more directly, several introduction sessions and interviews about the toolkit were undertaken in December 2024. The sessions were conducted one-on-one with members of the communities for which the toolkit was designed. Specifically, the individuals that were contacted as engagement partners were approached due to their roles as multipliers in the black and brown community in the city, with their background ranging from higher education lecturers and artists to student activists and folks who are active in NGOs and youth engagement. The intention behind this step was to foster in-depth engagement with the starter kit contents, gather feedback, and establish additional channels through which the resource is shared and discussed. To this end, the five community multipliers that were interviewed and engaged received multiple copies of the starter kit to pass on.

The interviewees had varying responses to the starter kit, all sharing positive first impressions, and importantly, that they would feel inspired to pick the pamphlet up and implement some of the suggested interventions based on the design and format. The value potential of the starter kit also quickly became apparent in that there was generally some base knowledge or prior experience in planting and foraging, indicating an interest in the topic, but a pronounced need for further resources and information.

The interviews were also aimed in large part at understanding whether the target groups of the starter kit felt specifically addressed in the content, language and design of the kit. The following quote from one introductory session echoes the sentiments expressed by the interviewees: "I identify as a Black woman living in the neighbourhood of Wedding, Berlin. As such, I feel like the kit directly speaks to my lived reality/sense of place and communities I'm a part of." Further, the intention of creating a non-prescriptive, accessible and self-reflective document wasn't lost on the interviewees, as exemplified by the following quote: "I like the Transforming Space section because it makes transparent the author's entry point to the

project, giving it an authentic personal touch and in my opinion, making the content of the kit even more accessible as a result. I also love how this section highlights the radical potential of creative interventions in resisting climate injustice - both in small individual ways, as well as collectively." All in all, the introduction sessions and interviews with multipliers in the communities that the starter kit is intended for indicate a strong potential for tangible impacts of the starter kit and can be built on through get-togethers for seed grenade making, planting, and foraging.

To continually gather feedback going forward, the toolkit also includes a QR-Code to a short 10-question survey, which serves to ascertain what motivates folks to interact with the toolkit, how the information is presented and received, and if they are likely to implement any of the suggested methods of intervention. It is intended that future feedback from this survey will be used to tweak and improve future iterations of the document, as well as representing a chance to further gauge the project's long-term impact and potential.

In the meantime, there are several impacts that are associated with the process of implementing the CIRCE project itself. On one hand, this is the work of bundling and filtering of relevant information to include in the toolkit – creating a resource pool that can continually be improved and harked back to for this and related future projects. This includes a Linktree resource that is also accessible through the toolkit via QR-Code. Here, readers can find links to additional, more detailed instructions, such as, for example, which exact wildflower seeds to use for seed grenades in Berlin,as well as relevant background information like news articles and videos and films. These resourced are categorised and associated with each of the interventions or methods suggested in the toolkit. For example, the site links to step-by-step instructions for creating a seeds bomb, as well as a news article about a teacher who uses chalk to inform passersby about different plants in the city by making chalk drawings and writing on the pavement. Eventually, information such as opportunities to participate in public realm interventions in Berlin could also be included here. As this online resource can be improved even after distribution of the document, this feature enables a wealth of future impacts and scenarios for the project.

Similarly, the discussions, conversations, and community building that occurred due to my work on the CIRCE project represents an impact that is already apparent. As outlined previously, this includes the establishment of new, lasting networks through workshopping and discussing the toolkit at the aloti e.V. farming retreat, as well as ongoing engagement with members of the black and brown communities in Berlin about the project by collecting feedback and discussing the proposed content and format of the document. As this process included folks who are active in collectives and initiatives, such as isusu-ffena student groups at the urban planning at TU Berlin, but also individuals who were previously further or

completely removed from processes of spatial negotiation and analysis, the voices reflected in shaping the starter kit as the final output of the project are manifold. This process makes the mirroring of the purpose of the document as a start kit and my personal experience during the process of creating it most apparent. The project aims to establish a foundation that empowers people to engage in public realm interventions wherever they are at, whether by gaining knowledge, developing an interest, or exploring one of the methods outlined in the starter kit. This foundation is designed to foster future discussions, support the implementation of such interventions, or encourage individuals to join groups active in similar efforts. While working on the project and thereby expanding my community, I experienced this process of empowerment firsthand.

A further step required in the continuation of this project is to consider the means of outreach and engagement. While initially part of the project scope, extensive workshops about the starter kit and its contents with members of black and brown communities could not be implemented due to time constraints. Currently, spreading awareness about the project within these communities is therefore limited to word of mouth, existing channels and groups, such as telegram chats that were set up following community events about topics related to climate justice or the built and natural environment, and the physical spaces that the toolkit is available in. While this is already an extensive and effective network within the city, to fully align with the documents' objective, additional outreach methods will become necessary. This could include an increased use of social media and the implementation of the aforementioned workshops to gain additional traction. Simultaneously, these steps will require a careful balancing act and focus on local residents and affected groups to maximise impact while reducing the dynamics that can contribute to gentrification.

Of course, the ultimate goal of the starter kit is to lead to noticeably greener, more restful neighbourhoods that invoke a sense of ownership and inclusion for the residents and are resistant to gentrification. However, the personal journeys that eventually enable these developments is where the project seeks to get started.

E. Learning and Contributions for CIRCE

The key lesson from this project was the realization that a "starter kit" rather than a toolkit would be most effective for supporting community-led public greening interventions. As discussed, this shift was not just in name but in purpose, focusing on offering accessible entry points rather than an exhaustive guide. This experience highlighted the value of designing projects with immediate, practical benefits in mind to meet the specific needs of the communities one is working with.

The CIRCE fellowship's structure was instrumental in shaping this approach. Conversations and workshops at CIRCE summits sparked valuable discussions on inclusivity and scale, helping me realize the need to adjust course. My CIRCE mentors provided crucial guidance, encouraging me to take iterative steps. This advice allowed me to progress without needing a perfect vision from the start, which kept the project flexible and community-responsive.

The fellowship also encouraged me to engage with other climate justice initiatives, connecting me to community workshops where I received direct feedback from participants. These interactions confirmed that simple, actionable steps were more valuable than a prescriptive manual. CIRCE's emphasis on collaborative impact enabled me to integrate this input and broaden my network.

Ultimately, CIRCE's commitment to creative impact through community-building transformed this project. The mentorship, workshops, and community-centered focus provided me with the tools to create a starter kit that is not just a document but a foundation for community engagement and empowerment—an embodiment of CIRCE's collaborative approach.

F. Further Material

1. Snapshots

Figure 5. Snapshots of the different panels of the starter kit. DIN-A3.

2. Flip-through Video/GIF, Image Material (Front Cover, Back Cover Collage, and Mapping)

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1i_JUjXx_fyeByAg8QMygqknXxJaE3jYB?usp=sharing

I. Bibliography

Begrünung von Baumscheiben—Aber richtig! Kleiner Leitfaden für die ökologische
Bepflanzung von Baumscheiben. (2024). BUND Berlin e.V.

Curran, W., & Hamilton, T. (2017). Just Green Enough: Urban Development and
Environmental Gentrification.

Der Garten von nebenan: Leitfaden zur Begrünung im öffentlichen Raum. (2014). Grüne Liga
Berlin e.V.

Gould, K. A., & Lewis, T. L. (2017). Green gentrification: Urban sustainability and the struggle
for environmental justice (First published). Routledge.
https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315687322

Kanosvamhira, T. P. (2024). Exploring urban community gardens as 'third places': Fostering
social interaction in distressed neighbourhoods of Cape Town, South Africa. Leisure
Studies, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2024.2383481

Klaiber, H. A., Abbott, J. K., & Smith, V. K. (2017). Some Like It (Less) Hot: Extracting Trade-
Off Measures for Physically Coupled Amenities. Journal of the Association of
Environmental and Resource Economics, 4(4), 1053–1079.
https://doi.org/10.1086/692842

Landor-Yamagata, J. L., Kowarik, I., & Fischer, L. K. (2018). Urban Foraging in Berlin:
People, Plants and Practices within the Metropolitan Green Infrastructure.
Sustainability, 10(6). https://doi.org/10.3390/su10061873

Schrade, N. (2020). Climate Justice Implications of Planning Responses to Urban Heat
Islands: London and Berlin.

Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung, Bauen und Wohnen. (2024). Geoportal Berlin—FIS-
Broker (No. FIS-Broker) [Dataset].

Stoetzer, B. (2018). Ruderal Ecologies: Rethinking Nature, Migration, and the Urban
Landscape in Berlin. Cultural Anthropology, 33(2), 295–323.
https://doi.org/10.14506/ca33.2.09