



International Year of Cooperatives



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The Village That Lives Differently Cooperatives as a Response to the Student Housing Crisis



Berlin's Student Housing Crisis

"We hear [...] dramatic stories from people calling us, saying: I must sleep on the subway. [...] It's especially tough at the beginning of the semester. And we just can't absorb it."

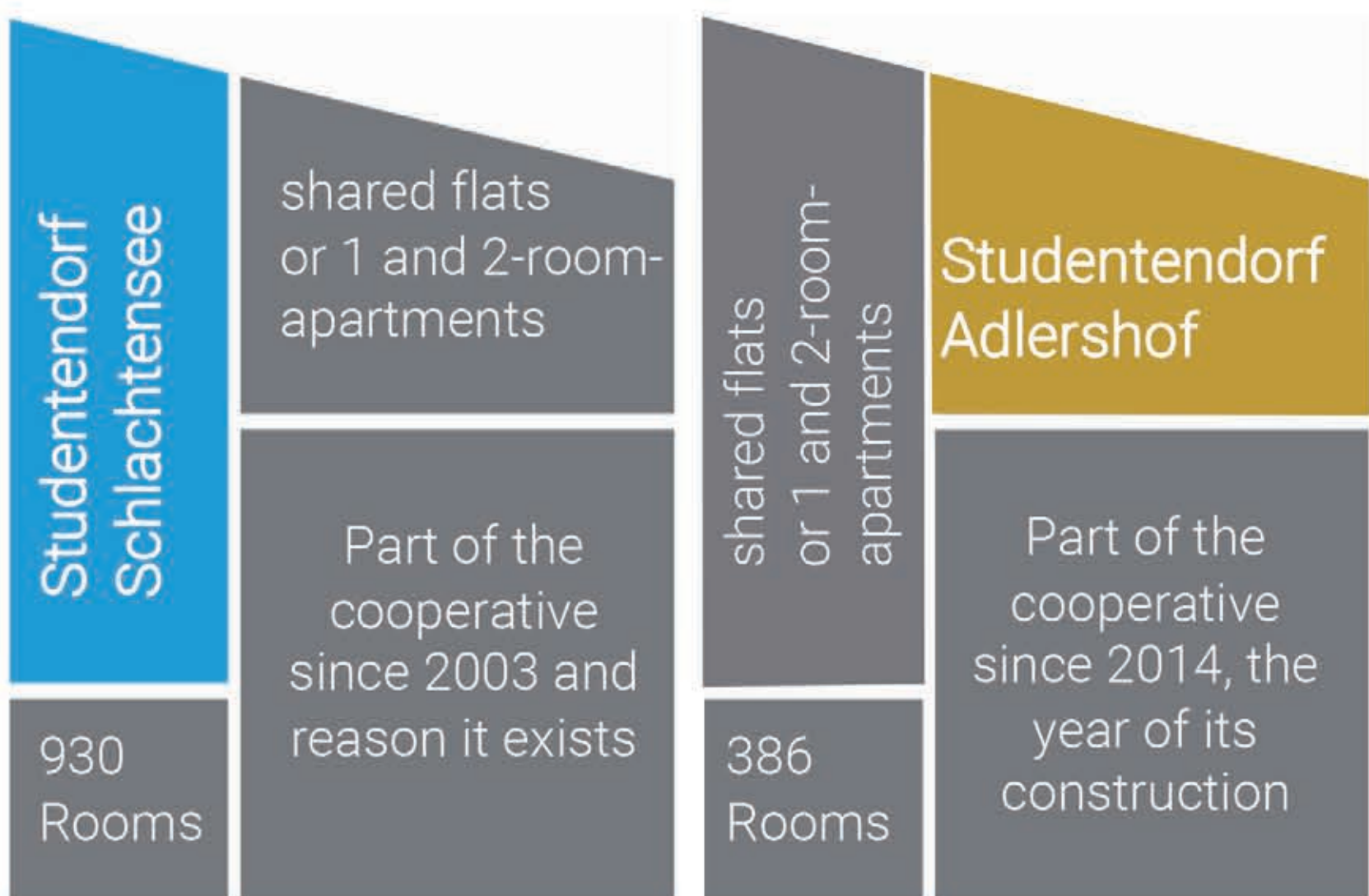
Dr. Bettina Widner,
Communications Studentendorf Schlachtensee

With over 200,000 students and only approx. 10,000 beds in public student dormitories, thousands are left scrambling for a place to live in Berlin. Waiting lists exceed 5,200 students, with average waiting times of over a year.

While public student housing remains relatively affordable, averaging 20 €/m² including utilities and shared spaces, supply falls dramatically short. Meanwhile, the average rent for a shared flat in the city has reached 650 €, while the federal financial housing-aid remains capped at 380 €, regardless of city or market conditions and privately run dorms charging up to 74 €/m², with a citywide average of 37,8 €/m² — turning student living into a speculative housing market.

The situation is especially dire for international students, who often lack local networks or knowledge of alternatives. Many fall into overpriced, isolating arrangements — far removed from the social and financial support they need.

This is not just a housing issue — it's a structural failure. But alternatives exist.



The Studentendorf Cooperative

Originally built between 1957 and 1959 with support from the U.S. government, the Studentendorf Schlachtensee was designed to promote international exchange and community-oriented living among students.

By the late 1990s, much of the complex was at risk of demolition. In 2002, former residents and allies founded the Studentendorf Schlachtensee eG - a student-led housing cooperative built on the principles of collective ownership, democratic governance, and non-profit operation. Their goal: to preserve the village as an affordable and self-managed living space for future generations of students.

In 2003, the cooperative acquired the site and began a careful, house-by-house renovation process that will continue through 2026. In 2014, the newly built Studentendorf Adlershof was added to the cooperative's portfolio.

Today, the cooperative provides 1,316 places, employs around 45 staff members, and is democratically owned by 135 active members - all working to sustain a model of student housing that prioritizes community over profit.

Shared rooms in Schlachtensee range from 475 € to 573 € per month

Small apartments (~22 m²) cost around 643 € per month, all-inclusive

Rent increases are capped at 3.5 % per year (every March).

Fair Rents or High Costs?

It seems that the rent is high, but it includes utilities such as heating, electricity, water, and internet, as well as furnishings, shared spaces, and access to on-site support. A resident told us that the rents are justified and transparently calculated, especially considering that the recent heritage-sensitive renovations are already covered in the current rent level.



Compared to private rentals or public dorms, the Studentendorf offers a model that emphasizes shared

infrastructure, simplicity of access, and everyday cohabitation, shaped by its cooperative structure rather than commercial interests.

Most residents live in shared flats with up to 13 people, each with a private room, often with a private bathroom, shared kitchens and common areas. The layout encourages daily interaction and a sense of community. This arrangement may not be suitable for those who value their privacy, as it involves regular contact with flatmates.

Where is the cooperative?

When former residents and supporters came together to save the Studentendorf from demolition in the early 2000s, they deliberately chose the cooperative model. The goal was not just to preserve the buildings, but to create a structure that would enable collective ownership, democratic participation, and long-term social responsibility.

Although the Studentendorf is organised as a cooperative, many residents are not aware of it, and most are not members. For non-member residents town hall meetings and personal initiatives are the only opportunities for participation, while the cooperative is currently shaped primarily by alumni.

Still, membership is open to all, and those who join gain a vote in the general assembly and the ability to influence decisions about the cooperative's future. The Studentendorf is not profit-driven: income is reinvested in maintenance, infrastructure, and the long-term preservation of the project.



Studentendorf Schlachtensee in June 2025, Photograph by the authors

A Cooperative with Limits

The Studentendorf Schlachtensee shows that student housing can be organised differently: collectively owned, socially accessible, and not profit-driven, especially for international students, who benefit from simple application procedures and low entry barriers.

At the same time, the model has limits. Rents are only moderate, stays limited to four years, and the location suits academic life more than city life.

The Studentendorf cannot solve the broader housing crisis, but it shows what is possible when housing is based on solidarity rather than speculation. With political support and structural change, cooperative models like this could grow from exception to essential part of a fairer housing system.



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HOW TO BUILD A BETTER WORLD? IN SEARCH FOR COOPERATIVE TRANSFORMATION

