

Berlin

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A giant death star-like ball hovers over Berlin's Alexanderplatz, a remnant of the Cold War struggle to seem powerful. Its lit from underneath, casting it an ominous glow, just the kind of comically-evil thing you'd see in a bad movie.

Just across the way is a childlike spaceship standing in front of a glowing dome and inside — well, inside, as a person at the desk put it in their thick German accent, “everything is a little bit chaos”.

The Chaos Communications Congress has taken over the building. The dome on the top floor is filled an ongoing series of interesting talks, the lounge underneath it is filled with couches and rugs and rocking music for people to hang out, and the floor beneath that is filled with people in front of monitors watching the warm glow of computer code scroll by. The place is filled with hackers.

I don't particularly like computers, but there's a definite charm to these people's cast of mind. They like to get stuff done. There are tables with soldering irons and pliers and lego blocks and cubes of blinking lights and animation software and magnifying glasses and more. One group has built little blinking tags that figure out which room you're in and report it to a central server. Another has shown everyone how to purchase VOIP phones from the electronics store across the street, hook them up to a conference network they've built, and then return them when the conference is over. Others are showing off the stuff they've built, from software that can let you surf the Internet completely anonymously to laptops that can be distributed to the Third World for \$100 a pop.

For these people, there's no separation between work and fun. It's not like other conferences where you sit during the day in quiet seats taking notes on carefully preselected talks and then spend the nights out drinking with your buddies. You can spend the days drinking and the nights listening to talks, each blending into each other, with games and working and gabbing on the side. Couches next to lectures, couches in lectures, lectures from couches.

Even if you don't like the subject matter, you have to admire the atmosphere. What other group has a place like this, existing somewhere between occupation and hobby and subculture, between conference and convention and hangout? It's fun, it's educational; it's occupation, it's friendship; it's building, it's destroying. It is, indeed, a little bit chaos.