

The doubt lingers on in Berlin

Berlin has moved along unexpected paths since the reunification of Germany 17 years ago. A disappointment to investors; it remains unsettled, full of old and new contrasts. But the new capital is very much alive, even if it isn't growing.

At first sight, Berlin has merged nicely after the wall came down in 1989. In fact, the most interesting areas of today are right where the wall used to be, cutting the city mercilessly in two. But some old stereotypes die hard. Even if the "Ossis" and "Wessis" - East and West Germans - have established many new meeting grounds, they don't necessarily play together. And while some differences are ageing, others are new:

In the 1990s, hordes of West German bureaucrats packed their papers and moved from Bonn to Berlin. This resulted in overly optimistic post-wall estimates regarding seepage of capital and labour. Some of the trendiest architects money could buy were invited to splurge in glass and steel, but when growth failed to happen, striking new contrasts appeared. The high-rise, hyper-modern creations were forced to accept rubble and bombed-out buildings – some untouched since World War II – as permanent neighbours.

But it was too soon to despair; having for long been used as studios, galleries, and even housing, by avant-garde artists, these ruins have often served as catalysts for unexpected changes in the city's life. So even if capital investment is normally regarded as crucial for urban development, it is in large part its failure that has made sure Berlin is Europe's most interesting city right now.

Artistical doubt

The Norwegian Lars Ramberg is an artist whose ideas have had a noticeable impact on Berlin. He was responsible for placing the word "Zweifel" - "*doubt*" – on top of the Palast der Republik, the former power base for the Communist Party of the DDR. The seven large letters lit up the district of Mitte for four and a half months until Lars was forced to dismantle his installation when sponsorship money was withdrawn.

- Other monuments tend to seal off history. Their ambition is to mark the end of an epoch, to close the lid on the past. My Zweifel project can never be like that. This is also implicit in the nature of the word "*doubt*" itself, says Lars.

There is a widespread perception that the Palast der Republik is an unattractive building, and the *Bundestag* has decided that it should be demolished. The city authorities have already removed the marble that surrounded the characteristic bronze coloured windows, and Lars suspects this was done to make it look even worse. - They were simply discarded, he says. - They are now contemplating putting up a copy of the old Hohenzollern Palace on the site. This renaissance palace was built in 1540, but later partly destroyed by the relatively indiscriminate allied bombing during the war. The rest was torn down by the communist regime.

- My opinion is that the Palast has been downgraded because it is a prominent example of unfashionable East German architecture. But I think the choice between the two buildings really is about which part of the city's history deserves attention. Most people here have vivid

memories of the communist era, but the renaissance is a distant past. And it was in the Palast der Republik that "die Wende" – "*the shift*" - was initiated in 1989.

"Die Wende" was sparked off in October 1989 when a crowd gathered outside the Palast der Republik shouting slogans in favour of the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who was visiting for the celebration of the DDR's 40th anniversary. The following spring all the world's attention was again directed towards the building, as, for the first and last time in its history, the DDR held free elections.

- The Palast der Republik was not only the centre of power during the communist era. It also served as a kind of community centre where people could go bowling, have a drink or even get married, says Lars Ramberg. Now 42, he has been a resident of Berlin since 1998. As of today he lives right by Karl-Marx-allee in Friedrichshein, East Berlin, a showcase from the past that has a similar story to tell.

- There has been talk of tearing down the apartment buildings around here too, but this has not happened simply because too many people live here - many ever since the apartments were built. The DDR regime invested a lot of pride in this avenue: it was constructed in 1953 when this part of Berlin was still a pile of rubble. The area's beauty – or lack of it - lies in the eye of the beholder. I certainly think it is valuable and should be preserved.

Claustrophobia

West Berlin was a safe haven for rockers and artist even before the reunification, partly because the young men who moved here during the Cold War were exempt from doing their military service. Accordingly, the enclave acted like flypaper for people seeking an alternative lifestyle: it was a city of squatters, punks and Alsations. Even the likes of David Bowie, Iggy Pop and Nick Cave came here because of the unique and progressive cultural pull, which included easy access to drugs, and an enticingly claustrophobic atmosphere.

- The city was kept alive by a united West during the Berlin Blockade of 1948-49, and this artificial respiration was prolonged throughout the Cold War, the urbanite Lena Schulz zur Wiesch tells us. She is working on a project about "divided cities" at Humboldt University's Institute for Social Sciences, which is situated on Unter den Linden, the stately old main street of East Berlin. - Half of the enclave's fiscal budget for three decades consisted of West German subsidies.

- Those who decided to live in West Berlin enjoyed low rents, and cheap transport and telephone bills. Workers made an additional 8 % on their salaries. This was called "Zitterzulage", literally "*tremble addition*". And those who established industry not only got direct economical support from the West German state, but also access to a cheap labour force through a growing number of Turkish guest workers. In spite of this, only the pharmaceutical company Schering AG chose to remain in Berlin throughout the Cold War. But the Turks have continued to leave their stamp on the city: today one out of every seven inhabitants is of Turkish heritage, a total of almost half a million people.

- The united city of Berlin had a total population of just over three million in 1989. When the city was made capital again and the national administration was moved from Bonn, the government estimated an increase to around five million by the year 2010. A lot of new non-residential buildings were constructed, in fact seven million square metres of office space in

ten years. But the influx of people has not been as expected, and the population today is the same as 1989. Many new office buildings still remain empty.

East and west

Berlin's subsidies were gradually reduced until their total removal in 1995. The unemployment rate has increased from 8 % in 1990 to 19 % today. Berlin - which still has three universities, two operas and two large libraries - remains an expensive city to run. The number of city districts was cut from 23 to 12 in an attempt to reduce the amount of people employed in the bloated public sector. As a result of this, Kreuzberg of West Berlin was joined with Friedrichsheim of the East. While Kreuzberg is a bohemian but socially strained district - it is also home to the majority of the city's Turks - the aforementioned Friedrichsheim is one of the most architectonically characteristic and in all respects a thoroughly uniform areas of the East.

The persisting difference between east and west is humorously expressed in a mock-fight that takes place every year on the bridge that divides these two districts, the peculiarly beautiful Oberbaumbrücke. Here, every August, participants throw rotten tomatoes and plastic bags filled with water at each other, while chanting that they "shall never be one". This "Spassaktion" is, however, not really directed towards the adversary, but at the unification of city districts against the will of the people.

For the Turks, Kreuzberg has become a thriving community. Around one in three living here is of Turkish heritage, and they have built up a strong infrastructure. Such services as health care and legal advice are available in Turkish, and in spite of some reports to the contrary, they are well accepted here. They expect less of that in the east.

When I was in Berlin in 1989, in a rare moment of visionary foresight regarding world history, I came upon a group of young people in a desolate square in the cold dark winter of East Berlin. I can best describe them as "polite punks": they were demonstrating *against* reunification, but were quiet as mice. Some were waving cabbage heads attached to poles, and it was easy to see that their subdued anger was directed towards Helmut Kohl, the then West German Chancellor, who at the time was one of the most euphemistic spokesmen for the reunification. I observed these young people as in a mirror - a surprising apparition from the other world, the other side, yet so much like me in opinion and behaviour.

Mr Kohl was the man behind the famous vision of "blühende Landschaften" - flowering landscapes -, a wording which in some ways has returned to haunt him. The political establishment aimed to erase all the social differences as quickly as the wall itself, and it has been estimated that the reunification so far has cost an unbelievable 1.4 trillion Euro. And yet so many of the expectations have remained unfulfilled. The reason for this is not only that the economic effort turned out to be too much of a burden, but also that the forced division of 30 years had indeed created certain distinctions that were less visible to the eye.

A sentimental revenge

The East German constitution was suspended five months after the wall was levelled, and a further half year later, the entire East German state ceased to exist. The proud DDR propaganda machine was devoured to the last mouthful, as the voices pleading for a more tactful process were drowned out. Now, 18 years later, the euphoria has evaporated, and the East Germans have had their sentimental revenge in the shape of the cultural phenomenon

"Ostalgi", which peaked (also commercially) with the 2003 movie "Good Bye Lenin!". It was filmed in Friedrichshein, of course.

The Ostalgi has created an upswing for symbols and products that were once popular in the DDR. Notable examples are the people's car Trabant and the TV-puppet Sandmännchen, but the most sorely missed personage of all was, somewhat surprisingly, the "Ampelmännchen". This is the eager little green (and sometimes red) figure in the traffic lights all over East Berlin. The Ampelmann was, in line with the general trend, mercilessly removed from the cityscape. He soon became the personification of the Ostalgi, and forcefully fought his way back so that now he is being installed in intersections all over Germany. And while tourists in Berlin go hunting for military caps sporting the communist star, the die-hard "Ossies" can actually once again go shopping for a few products branded "Hergestellt in den neuen Bundesländern" – "*made in the DDR*". The future indeed always moves along unexpected paths.

- All in all these seemingly insignificant symbolic fights, whether they are about consumer goods or buildings and statues, are results of the fact that in the East what happened felt less like reunification and more like annexation. So the Ostalgi is about more than just sentiments, says Lena Schulz zur Wiesch. - Not even the arrangements that were superior in the East were considered worth holding on to. For example, the kids in the East were offered nursery places when they were just a couple of months old, while in the West they had to wait until the age of three. Yet the West German arrangement was chosen, even if the Eastern model could point to the fact that around 95 % of the women there were working.

A diminishing divide

It was the clothes, and especially the low-quality shoes, that made it easy to distinguish between Ossies and Wessies during the winter of 1989-90. Today, one of the few remaining giveaways is the dialect. But there is still some mutual scepticism between the groups on a more relational level: The Ossis typically feel that they are looked down upon, while a popular opinion among Wessis is that financial support to the east is too high.

Peter Brock, local news editor in Berliner Zeitung, hesitates when I asks him to expand on the subject. He says the differences remained quite strong for roughly a decade, but that they are now diminishing fast. - It is true that in some areas of East Berlin you will still only meet Ossis, along with immigrants from further east, and that there are areas in West Berlin where the Ossis could never afford to live. But this can be viewed from a different angle. In Berlin today every sixth household is dependant on social security, and the city has lost 140 000 jobs in the last 17 years. So it is just as important to simply focus on the cleavage between the rich and the poor.

- In addition to this, there is a significant generation gap which is unfolding in such areas as the housing market. Eastern districts like Marzahn, Lichtenberg and Pankow are dominated by elderly people, and many apartments are not inhabited at all. This creates big problems for the landlords. Many young people in their 20's or 30's have moved to the West, while some a little older, maybe in their 50's, have moved further east. And it is in these desolate, depopulated areas that neo Nazism is most likely to gain a foothold among the remaining young.

Peter Brock claims that it is the new central areas - like Prenzlauer Berg, Mitte and Friedrichshein, all formerly just east of the wall - that have changed the most since 1989. –

These are popular areas with a lot of German migrants, especially from the West. But those who live there will be counted as East Berliners, even if they were born in Frankfurt or Moscow. So when, for instance, marriage statistics show that Osis and Wesis very rarely intermarry, one must remember that this material is always a little distorted.

The expected and much-feared mass immigration from the east in connection with the EU enlargement has not materialized, but Germany has a special law stating that citizenship is based on blood and not soil (*ius sanguinis*). This means that anyone able to trace their German ancestry within the past 200 years can obtain a German passport. Many Poles and Russians ("Wolgagermans") have taken advantage of this, and if one travels far into East Berlin, hearing Russian on the S-bahn is almost as usual as hearing Turkish on the streets of Kreuzberg. It is hardly surprising that many Turks feel bypassed by this law.

The remains of the wall

I remember hoping they would preserve as much of the wall as possible in the centre, leaving openings for traffic and movement. But the hatred towards this artificial and forced separation was too strong in German minds, and there was no room for Cold War-sentimentality. However, even though the wall was efficiently torn down, the observant visitor to Berlin today will discover a line drawn in strategic places in the asphalt, a double track of cobblestone on the ground, with the inscription "Berliner Mauer 1961-1989".

The Norwegian author Dag Solstad lives in the heart of Kreuzberg, even though he doesn't speak a word of German. As a self-proclaimed Ossi he has said that the day the wall came down was no day of celebration for him. This is how he depicts Berlin in his autobiographical novel "16.07.41" from 2002:

"Four realms have gone under in 80 years, all having Berlin as their capital. The German Empire, the Weimar Republic, Nazi Germany, and the DDR. All of these have left their proper footprints, Nazi Germany mostly by what was torn down. For forty years Berlin was a divided city. The part that became the capital of the DDR was mainly the old, central Berlin. [...] Imperial Berlin survived under the DDR. [...] But not the palace. There the Palast der Republik emerged, now a place of execution, castigated and dishonoured. Berlin misses the palace. Berlin will never be Berlin again without its palace, this enormous colossus, which was the centre of all the Prussian victory parades. [...] But it can never be rebuilt. That would only be a cardboard copy. Something is forever gone, and will remain a hole in the city's metaphysics, as is the case of the Reich Chancellery and its attached bunker. It has to be this way" (pages 47-48)

I could add that the removal of the wall has apparently left a similar "hole in the city's metaphysics". This is a hole full of doubt. But Berliners have learnt to live with it, this being a city where "Zweifel" is a force that optimistically invites to an open future.