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**COMEBACK
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Creating a new Berlin





In Potsdamer Platz, modern architecture meets Berlin's history.

THOU ART BERLIN

BY ROBERT MCGARVEY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY WERNER PAWLOK

TWENTY YEARS AFTER THE WALL
CAME DOWN, THE ONCE-DIVIDED
CITY HAS TAKEN ITS PLACE AS
A EUROPEAN CULTURAL CAPITAL

I was standing on the Oberbaumbrücke — a gorgeous, gingerbread-colored bridge, complete with towers, turrets, and arches — when it struck me that in Berlin, art is where you see it.

Many people call the bridge, built in the style of a city gate, and completed in 1896, the prettiest in Berlin, and that's a big statement in a metropolis that has some 1,700 bridges crossing its many rivers. But the image that sparked the thought was a huge mural painted on a building on the banks of the Spree, the river the Oberbaumbrücke crosses. The mural depicts a man, in a dress shirt and tie, his hands bound by a glittering gold chain and handcuffs. There are no



From left: The former location of Checkpoint Charlie; brass paving stones commemorate victims of the Third Reich; the Scharf-Gerstenberg Collection at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin; homemade Pfannkuchen at Bäckerei Balzer; the Kreuzberg section is known for its striking graffiti art. Above: the Oberbaumbrücke crosses the river Spree.

words — what you see is what you see. I pondered whether it means anything that the image is on the West Berlin side of the river (the capitalist side, in the days of divided West Berlin), while on the other side, in the Friedrichshain neighborhood of the former Communist East Berlin, a sparkling new office tower serves as the European headquarters for Universal Music.

Flux. If cities had first names, that would be Berlin's. No other city has undergone the kinds of changes — both exhilarating and traumatic — that have redefined Berlin again and again over the past century. Just two decades ago, for instance, residents of East Berlin couldn't cross the Oberbaumbrücke, and West Berliners could do it only if they were willing to put up with the East's bureaucracy (as well as the possibility of unwanted detention on the

other side). But in one week in Berlin I grew fixated on that passageway, crossing it a dozen times, reveling in the freedom to do so.

PAINTING THE TOWN

Down on the ground, in Friedrichshain, I came to a site that has brought visitors from around the world to this rapidly transforming neighborhood: the East Side Gallery. After the Berlin Wall — which had divided the city since 1961 — opened up in 1989, nearly all of the structure was destroyed in the jubilant aftermath. Celebrants and souvenir hunters started the work, and the government quickly tore down most of the wall.

But in Friedrichshain, then a gritty, mostly neglected neighborhood, a roughly one-mile section of the wall remained. Some 118 painters coman-

deered sections and created more than 100 murals that now constitute the East Side Gallery. Many of the murals are now adorned by innumerable graffiti markings, in the cacophonous spirit that defines Berlin art, but some of the earliest have been carefully restored by preservationists. Possibly the gallery's most famous image is a pop art-styled Trabant — the East German car, known for its inadequacies, that became a symbol of the Communist state — smashing through a wall. It's a perfect representation of what so much Berlin art is about.

The day I walked this stretch of the wall, the sky was a bleak gray, rain came down in a frigid drizzle, and a nasty wind rolled along the wall. But with each step I knew why I was in Berlin: to be an eyewitness to the rewriting of an urban hardscape, the creation of a city that itself radiates art.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Wherever I went in Berlin I saw art that made me think, even in places where I wasn't looking for it. For instance, in the Scheunenviertel (aka the Barn Quarter), Berlin's oldest surviving historic district and the epicenter of the city's bustling gallery scene, the art works that hit me hardest were the brass paving stones (*Stolpersteine*) that dot the neighborhood. I almost tripped over one on Gipsstrasse, and when I asked what they were doing on the walkway, my guide told me, they show where Jews lived. I looked more closely and saw that in the building in front of me there had been three members of the Marcuse family — Peter, 5 years old, was taken to Auschwitz; Erich went to Dachau; it didn't say where Johanna went. The guide, Miriam Bers, a Berlin

Great Sleeps + Smooth Rides

Hotel de Rome. Sir Rocco Forte's luxury hotel in the heart of the Mitte district (the city center) of the former East Berlin. The building once housed the state bank of the German Democratic Republic (aka East Germany). A room, with breakfast, typically runs around \$400 per night. hotelderome.com

The Mandala Hotel. This gorgeously designed hotel is in the heart of the rebuilt Potsdamer Platz, which is often compared to Times Square with its hustle and bustle and new wave architecture. Rooms, with breakfast, start at \$250 per night. themandala.de

Hotel Concorde. Nestled near the famous Kurfürstendamm, Berlin's longtime high-end shopping mecca, and in the heart of Charlottenburg (Berlin's tony west side), this hotel celebrates European design, with rooms featuring art and sophisticated furnishings. Rates run around \$250 per night. berlin.concorde-hotels.com/en

Hotel Elephant. With a history dating back to the 1500s, this is quintessential Weimar, and now a sleek member of Starwood's Luxury Collection. There's no better Weimar address. Rates are often under \$200 per night. starwoodhotels.com

German Rail. Germany's fast, reliable train system offers easy travel between cities (Berlin to Weimar around two hours). A rail pass is good for unlimited travel within a four- to 10-day period, and runs \$300-\$550 for first class, \$230-\$400 for second. bahn.de

The Hamish Morrison Galerie on Heidestrasse exhibits up-and-coming Berlin artists.



art expert, further explained that the brass stones are a project of artist Gunter Demnig, whose plan is to put brass markers in front of every dwelling in Germany where Jews had lived before the Nazis sent them off to die.

There are 10,000 artists working in Berlin today, Bers tells me. And much of their work reflects the collisions that have shaped Berlin, as I saw when I visited the Hamish Morrison Galerie on Heidestrasse to see an exhibit of Sophia Schama's *Urban Jungle* paintings. One 7-foot-by-11-foot canvas caught my eye, with its disembodied windows, urban debris, neon, and, laid on top of it all,

two broad bars of color. What does it mean? Is it about color creating sense of blight? "You could ask the artist," said Bers, who introduced me to a woman who looked to be in her 30s and seemed very shy. Of course, Schama wanted her works, not her words, to shape my experience of her provocative art. But there's the point: in Berlin, with its hundreds and hundreds of galleries, you could just bump into the artist whose work you're admiring.

EXTREME MAKEOVER

A quick ride on the U-Bahn (Berlin's rapid transit system) from Hamish Mor-

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risson Gallerie brought me to the spot where, more than any other, Berlin's flux is on inescapable, vivid display. Potsdamer Platz, a onetime wasteland — bombed-out land at the East-West border that no one wanted to make the effort to rebuild — has emerged since reunification as the epicenter of an architectural reinvention of Germany's capital. Where 20 years ago virtually nothing was happening, today there are glittering, glimmering — important — buildings, developed by Sony, Daimler, and others, and designed by leading architects including Renzo Piano, Richard Rogers, and Helmut Jahn.

Building by building — and with the investment of billions of euros — Berlin has created for itself a new center where before nobody would have gone. Stand in Potsdamer Platz — still a work in progress — and the energy radiates as Berlin reinvents itself. The building cranes are still at work because tomorrow is still being created.

REMEMBERING ICONS

While street art, contemporary architecture, and exciting new galleries are transforming Berlin, the city — home to 175 museums — still offers plenty of classic art. Much of the work in Berlin's museums is by German artists who may be lesser known to some American connoisseurs (such as Max Liebermann, who died in 1935 but who produced a large body of impressionist works, many of which on display at the Alte National Gallery in the Mitte district).

Berlin is home to at least one internationally known showstopper, though. Indeed, they say the most visited woman

TOMASZ MYSLUK/GETTY IMAGES (WEIMAR)



Above: The Alte Nationalgalerie located on Berlin's famed Museum Island, a Unesco National Heritage Site. Far left: The city's Schlesisches Tor subway station has been in operation since 1902, on the first Berlin U-Bahn line; a local Berliner playing a hand organ for passersby at the Brandenburg Gate.



and Iggy Pop (the latter best known for "Lust for Life"), shared a flat at Hauptstrasse 155, in the Schoeneberg neighborhood. I deciphered the U-Bahn routes, discovered that

in Berlin is Queen Nefertiti, wife of Pharaoh Akhenaten, circa 1300 BC. Her bust sits under glass in the Altes Museum in Museuminsel (Museum Island in Mitte), and as I stood there admiring the long neck and the beguiling facial features, a stream of visitors came by to share the view. Some theorists argue that Nefertiti played a central role in shaping modern-day attitudes about beauty, but I don't know about that. I do know I'm glad I trudged up to the second floor of the Altes Museum to see a sculpture that has stayed in my memory for decades; she is even prettier and more captivating in person than in my old art book.

Sometimes, too, there were dead ends in my search for the icons of Berlin's artistic past. I'd read that in the 1970s, a bleak period when West Berlin was mired in existential despair (and a very real fear that the Soviets might simply decide to eliminate it), two avant-garde music icons, David Bowie

the Kleistpark stop was just steps away from that address, and off I went. But when I got there, there wasn't much of interest to see. I poked into the courtyard, walked into a lobby, and realized that this was now a nondescript middle-class neighborhood — a world apart from the city that throbbed with demonstrators, squatters who refused to pay rent, anarchists, and the rest of the counter-cultural zoo that made the city an ideal home for Bowie and Pop. That was then, this is now and a walk in the former neighborhood of these iconoclasts makes vivid exactly how different — how settled, almost comfortable — Berlin has become.

Flux, right. Not far from the Bowie-Pop domicile is Rathaus Schoeneberg, a town hall-style building where, in 1963, John F. Kennedy shouted out, "Ich bin ein Berliner," exclaiming his bold promise of U.S. support for West Berlin. Linguists have long quibbled that Kennedy should

have dropped the *ein* — what he actually said was closer to "I'm a jelly doughnut," since a Berliner is a local pastry and the indefinite article *ein* sets up expectations about the noun that follows. No matter, that's a cavil for semanticists, the crowd went crazy when Kennedy tried out his German, and Americans and Berliners have shared a special tie ever since.

So there I was on departure day in the lounge at Tegel Airport and across from the Continental counter was a coffee shop. I had time before my flight, so I surveyed the pastries and, lo, there it was, *ein Berliner*. I'd wanted one since the day I arrived in Berlin but hadn't seen one — until now. So I promptly ordered in German so mangled that the counter-man looked at me and said, "You want a pancake?" Of course, I wanted to say, "Jah, Ich bin ein Pfannkuchen" — *Pfannkuchen* being the other, idiomatic word for the Berliner doughnut — but I laughed and held my tongue, and a minute later, I bit into a truly delicious Berliner.

Some things just don't change. ■

Freelancer Robert McGarvey says he's saving to purchase a flat on Karl Marx Allee in the former East Berlin.

Getting There: Continental offers nonstop service to Berlin from its hub

Stepping Back into Weimar Time

"The White Swan is ready to welcome you with open wings at any time," wrote Johann Wolfgang Goethe in the 19th century to an admirer who was contemplating a trip to visit the old master. (Goethe was the author of *Faust*, among hundreds of other poems, plays, and novels.) And there I was, some 200 years later, at the White Swan restaurant, directly adjacent to Goethe's house. Of course I ordered what the menu billed as "Goethe's favorite meal," slices of a tender braised beef, boiled potatoes, pickled beets, and a bowl of Grüne Soße, a remarkably tasty blend of assorted herbs, sour cream, and yogurt that's liberally applied to the potatoes.

One bite and I was transported back two centuries. That is the essence of Weimar, a small city about two hours south of Berlin that's all about the past. And what a glorious past it was. Besides Goethe, famed residents have included Johann Sebastian Bach, dramatist Friedrich Schiller, artists Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky, and — in the event you don't like music, literature, or painting — Walter Gropius, who founded the Bauhaus architectural movement in 1919.

Very little has changed in Weimar since Gropius left town in 1925. But that's the beauty of it. If Berlin is about flux, Weimar is about stasis. Part of the town was flattened by Allied bombs in World War II, but even the Communists who ruled Weimar after the partition of Germany into East and West knew a good thing when they stumbled into it. They painstakingly reconstructed much of obliterated Weimar to restore its old glory. There are odd touches (a statue of Russian literary icon Pushkin, for instance), but the effect nonetheless is powerfully historical.

Before I left town, I stopped at the Restaurant Elephantenkeller, another Goethe hangout from the 19th century for a beer and some potato dumplings. (Boil potatoes, then mash and mix with flour, eggs, seasoning; form into balls, drop into boiling water for seven minutes, and you've made a specialty of the German state of Thuringia, where Weimar is located). As I ate, I could picture Goethe and his playwright buddy Schiller ("Mary Stuart" may be his best-remembered work) sitting across the table, eating much the same, and haranguing me about obscure points in German literary history.

I'd traveled thousands of miles for exactly that vision, and I did not leave disappointed.

