

Berlin Program for Advanced German and European Studies

Berlin Program Walk
Public Art of Berlin's 750th City Anniversary
Briana Smith, FU Berlin/University of Iowa

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Report

What strikes many visitors to Berlin is that the city has of two of everything: two zoos, two main libraries and four operas. Partly, this goes back to the division of the city during the Cold War. So it is not surprising that Berlin celebrated its 750th anniversary in its typical Cold War way: Both East and West Berlin had their own – separate – parties.

In May 2015, our annual city walk was conceptualized by Briana Smith, Berlin Program Fellow and doctoral candidate at the University of Iowa in History. The tour explored the public art created and commissioned for the 750th anniversary of Berlin. Steeped in the competition between the systems both sides set up expensive programs with various cultural – and military - events. East Berlin focused on its historical center while West Berlin planned a boulevard with contemporary sculptures and an exhibition “Mythos Berlin.”

As the starting point for our walk Briana selected Nikolaikirche on the Fischerinsel – the southern part of the small island in the middle of the river Spree. The oldest part of Berlin, the Nikolaikirche has an incredible 800-year history and is far more than just a church. It served as a city council and was renovated and repurposed as a museum in 1987 in the GDR program to create a “new old city”. <http://www.stadtmuseum.de/nikolaikirche>

Around the corner the beautiful Baroque Palais Podewill at Klosterstraße 68-70 now invites guests to cultural events. During the GDR it served as the FDJ's “Haus der jungen Talente” between 1954-1991. <http://www.kulturprojekte-berlin.de/ueber-uns/podewil/geschichte-des-hauses.html>

A few streets away, Ephraimpalais – a spectacular Rococo palace built between 1762 and 1766 - charms bypassers. The “most beautiful corner” in Berlin had to make way in 1935 for the broadening of the Mühlendamm. Subsequently, sections of the façade were stored in Wedding, i.e. in the West. An East-West exchange of cultural goods in 1987 made it possible for East Berlin to get the original structural elements back. <http://www.stadtmuseum.de/ephraim-palais>

Our fourth stop were the frescoes commissioned by the GDR government to depict Berlin's history from its first record in 1237 as the twin cities Berlin and Cölln in the subway station Märkisches Museum. There are two copies of each of six maps on opposite walls of the station, one set near each track. In between the maps are reliefs by artists Karl-Heinz Schäfer and Ulrich Jörke, each in a style capturing the time period of the adjacent map - from Renaissance at the start through to socialist realism at the end.

We go on to the heart of what was previously West Berlin. Planned as a “temporary museum” between Wittenbergplatz and Rathenauplatz, the large sculptures and installations were commissioned by the Berlin cultural senate in cooperation with the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein.

Inspired by approaches that saw art being informed by sociological and architectural notions of space, the works were designed by contemporary artists. Viewed as anything but art by some sections of the (conservative) public, the pieces were criticized as ugly, displaced and a waste of money. <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skulpturenboulevard>

Less controversial, the work by Brigitte Matschinsky-Denninghoff and Martin Matschinsky at Breitscheidplatz named *Berlin* depict two broken chains symbolizing East and West Berlin.

The corner of Kudamm and Joachimsthaler Str. across from famous Café Kranzler is the original site of Olaf Metzel's sculpture "13.4.1981". Since November 2011 it is housed next to the Spreespeicher (altes Eierkühlhaus) in Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg. Metzel's work consists of a pile of crowd control barriers and a shopping cart. The fierce debate that ensued over this piece in West Berlin included denunciations of Metzel's work as a pile a rubbish and a waste of tax money. The reaction to this particular piece probably owes a lot to its name, which refers to April 13 when riots broke out following a false report which claimed a jailed RAF terrorist to be dead.

Rathenauplatz, the most western part of the Kudamm, is now one of the busiest freeway intersection within the city bounds. Close to where one of Europe's biggest entertainment parks stood – [Lunapark](#) – we visit Wolf Vostell's "Two Cadillacs in the Form of the Naked Maja" (a reference to a famous Goya painting) as the final stop on our tour. Conceived as criticism of the "German car fetish", a debate followed after its erection. Many citizens sent angry letter to Berlin's Mayor Eberhard Diepgen and the Senator for Culture Volker Hassemer who both defended the freedom of artistic expression. One lonely night two years before the Berlin Wall fell, a "Beton-Trabi" was added to the ensemble carrying the words: Einigkeit und Recht auf künstlerische Freiheit".

The tour held a number of surprises: The GDR's focus on historical reconstruction and West Berlin's engagement with contemporary art. The fierce debate that followed in West Berlin seems hard to grasp from today's vantage point but shows that art can and does plays an important role that should not easily be discounted.

Karin Goihl, Berlin Program



THE BERLIN PROGRAM FOR ADVANCED GERMAN AND EUROPEAN STUDIES promotes a new generation of young North American scholars with specialized knowledge of modern and contemporary Germany and Europe. The program supports scholars in all social science and humanities disciplines, including historians working on the period since the mid-18th century. Since its inception in 1986 at the Freie Universität Berlin the program has brought more than 300 fellows to Berlin. With our Berlin Walks we wish to offer an opportunity to engage with Berlin's complex and changing environment where politics, history, culture and art meet. www.fu-berlin.de/bprogram

COVER ILLUSTRATION
Photography: Briana Smith (edited)