

My Story: The East Side Gallery Today

Few of the artists expected our paintings to last more than a few months, but there was such interest that in 1991 The East Side Gallery was designated a listed memorial by the city of Berlin. This was an acknowledgement of the relevance of this remaining part of the Berlin Wall and the paintings on it.

As a memorial, it reminds us that 140 people died trying to scale the wall that divided communist East from West Berlin between 1961 and 1989. Along Mühlenstrasse (where the East Side Gallery is situated) at least ten people lost their lives in this particular border area. Some had tried to escape across the Spree to the riverbank on the West Berlin side but were shot and killed by East German (GDR) border soldiers or drowned as a result of hyperthermia or exhaustion.

A dramatic and particularly tragic incident occurred on the Kreuzberg (West) side of the river when children playing on the embankment fell into the river. They lost their balance or slipped and were unable to get out of the water. West Berlin emergency workers were not allowed to enter the Spree here and GDR border guards in control boats did not intervene.

These are tangible facts about the East Side Gallery, the Berlin Wall. But we must also think about the importance of the intangible facts, heritage and history, what is retained for future generations.

Heritage is the bedrock of culture and its critical function is to keep history alive, accessible and preserved for future generations.

The importance of memories and meaning are encapsulated in the history of the East Side Gallery as the longest part of the Berlin Wall standing today. It represents the stories of people, their hopes and dreams; it meant so much to so many.

It is not just a wall but memories kept alive, retained for future generations who didn't experience those times or know the associated stories.

Furthermore, the ethos of the East Side Gallery is that it is the Wall 'in situ'. It is the physical reminder of a divided city that was the world-wide symbol for The Iron Curtain and the Cold War.

Against this background, the dynamic of the East Side Gallery has waxed and waned in response to circumstances over the last thirty years. Various plans for the area resulted in controversy about the existence of this longest remaining stretch of the Wall; it appeared regularly in the press and became a political bone of contention.

Despite its protected memorial status, in 2013 unbelievably permission was given for a high-rise block of luxury flats to be built on the so called 'Death Strip', the land immediately behind the East Side Gallery. When workers tore down parts of the historic ESG to make way for an access route to the flats the public protested in their thousands.



Critics were angered that developers were sacrificing history for profit and the event became worldwide news. Such was the public outcry it brought the action to a halt while local politicians and the investor said they were looking for a solution. Despite this, in the quiet of pre-dawn, demolition went ahead.

One protestor remarked at the time of the demolition 'If you take these parts of the Wall away you take away the soul of the city'.

It was therefore a great relief when in November 2018, the State of Berlin transferred the East Side Gallery to the property of the Stiftung Berliner Mauer. It would be responsible for the preservation of the monument and promised that under their auspices no more parts of the East Side Gallery would be destroyed.

The Stiftung Berliner Mauer is currently developing a permanent open-air exhibition for the East Side Gallery within a park area at Stralauer Platz and along the river Spree. It will open in the Autumn of 2022. The exhibition will provide background information about the 1990 art action and the East Side Gallery paintings. It will also explain the border site and commemorate the victims of the Wall. The exhibition will use the works of art and the art action as a starting point to show how Mühlenstrasse and the surrounding urban area have been altered by the Wall, its fall and the years since 1990.

At the East Side Gallery, the paintings by more than 100 international artists from twenty-one different countries in 1990 are an intrinsic part of the past. While all have been over renovated or overpainted since 1990, the painting 'Hands' which I made with Peter Russell is today the only completely original painting. It was conserved for the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Wall and epitomises history and transformation having started out as a canvas idea.

By integrating the East Side Gallery into the new Spreepark as an "artistically transformed Wall monument", it will retain its symbolism. It is not virtual or remote like a picture or photo in a book but real and tangible. If you go to a museum there is evidence of the history of the divided city but you don't experience the intimidating physicality of the Berlin Wall. The capital is regaining a green open space for all citizens and visitors that harmoniously combines art, culture and nature.

The East Side Gallery reflects the time and belongs to the city and thereby the people. It can be considered as a Trichter, a funnel for the public to pass on their stories and personal experiences; therefore it serves as a vessel for memories.

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