

My Story: Life in Berlin

My links to Scotland remain strong especially through my family and artist friends but I regard Berlin more as my home. There has always been a lot more interest in my artwork in Germany where in the past collectors have sometimes described it as 'challenging'. It is important for me that the content has meaning and that it is also open enough for others to make their own interpretations.

As for suitable spaces to paint, I've had several studios over the years and many quite unusual.. In the early days when I attended the Glasgow School of Art I was fortunate to rent a 'Stables Cottage' in my home village in the centre of Fairlie. With living accommodation for myself and my two children above and stables and carriage space (both empty!) underneath. This was my first studio where I could paint and store my artwork.

Although I have often had the opportunity of art residencies in other countries, my studios have more regularly been spaces in Berlin and nearby. However since I arrived in Berlin I have always lived in Charlottenburg in West Berlin.

An early art space in Berlin was the Zitadelle (Citadel) a fortress from the 16th century and one of the best-preserved Renaissance military structures of Europe. It was built atop a medieval fort on a small island. Within one of the buildings there was Atelier work space for artists to rent. Some of the rules in this historical place were sometimes restrictive and when I was offered a work residency in Finland for three months I gave up my Zitadelle Atelier.

Studios in Berlin mainly came about through word of mouth, from artist contacts. One such was the Anthroposophical Hospital on the outskirts of the city which gave artists the use of rooms in a spacious building that was due to be renovated. The administrators generously allowed the artists to pay in kind with one artwork annually which later decorated their cafe restaurant, offices and hospital corridors. These kind of work spaces were always going to be temporary.

So from the quiet of the hospital grounds my next work space was exactly the opposite, a studio in Boxhagener Platz in a colourful district of Friedrichshain.

Following unification of East and West Germany, property speculators and investors quickly moved into the potentially most lucrative living area of Berlin Mitte, flats were renovated to luxury standard and property prices rose explosively. Students and artists steadily moved or were moved out of formerly cheap factory spaces in the city.

At that time I knew some artists who went back to home towns in West Germany. Those who stayed moved steadily further east in the city along with the students where rents were still cheap and Boxhagener Platz became one of those very popular areas. The main underground station Warschauer Strasse was nearby with plenty of parking space for students' second-hand bikes. It was one of the liveliest areas in Berlin especially for young people, with an abundance of cheap eateries, variety of small designer's shops, second hand bike shops, an exciting nightlife and interesting outdoor markets.

However after 18 months my particular work space in Boxhagener Platz was again part of a building to be renovated and so I had to move again. It was a time of great change particularly in and around Berlin, even road names changed to eliminate the old Marxists and Maoists of East Berlin!

In 1995 I moved to a work space in the disused Panzerhalle in Gross Glienicke, on a former military camp on the outskirts of Berlin. It was spacious and ideal for making large sculptures in addition to my paintings and drawings.

In 2007 the Panzerhalle was to be demolished and the artists who'd worked there were offered reasonable rental spaces in another building on the former military camp. I took a large studio space of 70 square meters, light and bright; it was luxury. It was during this time that I made sculptures occasionally at Lorbottle Hall in North England. When the studio rents at the Panzerhalle were considerably increased I was travelling away often so I gave up my studio.

I have now come full circle with a current Atelier and presentation space in my home which is a 'Laden' (shop) fronted flat of approximately 125 square meters. I first moved into it

in 1986 when I came to Berlin to study, renting a small room and sharing the flat at that time with two men.

It is a very desirable dwelling particularly now in Berlin. Part of a housing cooperative initiated one hundred years ago by a small group of philanthropic men interested in town planning and keen to change the living conditions for the working man.

Initial membership fee and rents are reinvested and there is a long waiting list for these flats which have considerable social elements, repairs are rapidly dealt with and a nearby concierge fulfils various help functions and support for tenants. The tree lined street has many grassed areas between the buildings and landscaped green courtyards at the back.

I commented at the beginning of this explanation of my life in Berlin and that I regard Berlin as my home. Perhaps surprisingly but pleasingly, I've lived in the same flat in Charlottenburg during this time – which is my home and now my studio.

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