

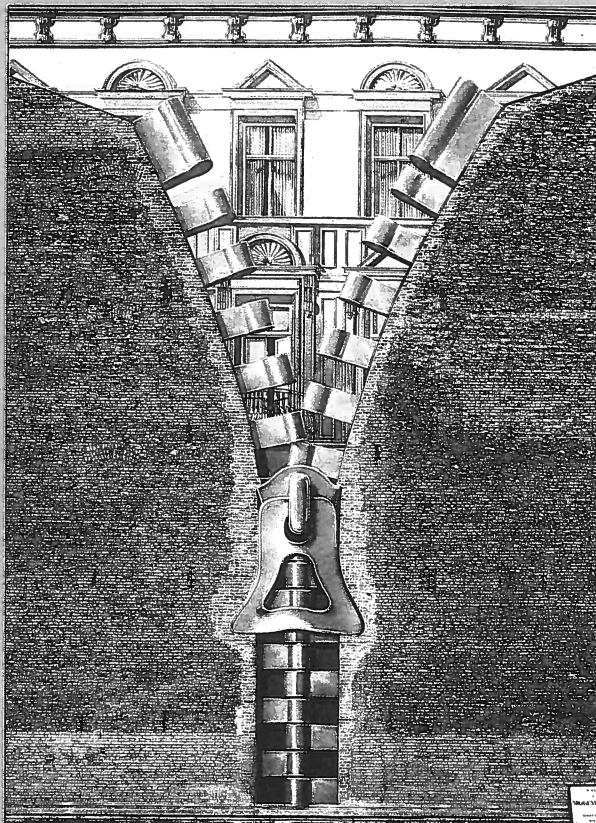
ISOLATED by the Wall and the stalemated politics of the Cold War, West Berliners live on an island in time as much as in topography. Berlin is a city vexed by the European past, and by the ghost of its own tragic history. Despite the chrome-plated face on certain swanky streets, the ruins and rubble of World War II remain. Bullet holes still pock the blistering facades of apartment buildings in marginal areas; live mines are occasionally dredged up from the city's inner city boat canals.

And then there is the Wall, grand icon to the Cold War. By day it seems banal—plain, ugly concrete that almost seems to buckle under the weight of the psychedelic graffiti scrawled all over it. At night, however, the Wall shows its true face; sodium lights make it glow balefully, like gray glacial ice. When you see the machine gun nests and the guard dogs placed on the “death strip” on the Wall's far side, you realize that this is the nervous seam of two warring political continents.

Yet Berlin's dominant mood is freewheeling, colorful, and kinetic these days, largely because of the city's active counterculture. The alternatives view Berlin no longer as an outpost of the Cold War, but as an “experimental meadow” beyond the sterility and mind-dulling materialism of the rest of Germany (or “Germoney,” as they call it). The city, which is still regarded by West Germans as their intellectual capital, simmers with bold political debate and a sort of spiritual alchemy. The alternatives' fresh perspectives on the East-West conflict—issuing from a city which blooms, like a hothouse flower, 110 miles behind enemy lines—have a special authority. The message fairly leaps from their art—huge wall murals scattered around town, depicting images of transfiguration, escape,

MURAL: GERT NEUHAUS, 1979

Cracks in the Wall



A painted zipper opens to reveal a painted facade in the courtyard at 98 Zillestrasse

and discovery.

Like other Western countercultures, this one is an amalgamation of '60s radicals, feminists, young people (many of them avoiding the West German draft), idealistic professionals, and those simply drawn to bohemian living. What distinguishes the alternatives from similar movements in the United States is their political engagement. The alternatives share a general European sense of social activism; they

are uncompromising in their belief that people must have politics and that apathy is the enemy.

Nor does their politics lack focus. The alternatives have their own party, the Alternative Liste, which—although small in terms of voters—has upended politics in Berlin. Like its national counterpart, the Green Party, the AL is ecologically minded and antimilitaristic. The Greens, however, are severely split on the place of Marxist thinking (and put ecological issues above notions of class struggle). The AL is an explicitly socialist party with a very pragmatic nuts-and-bolts approach. Operating within an urban industrial center, it enters coalitions if necessary. Its members take care to do their homework on public issues like trade or transportation, drawing heavily on advice from the many university professors who are AL members.

In the interest of ensuring participatory democracy, the AL makes decisions according to a principle of consensus. It keeps in close contact with its fourteen neighborhood councils, and rotates representatives in the Berlin parliament every two years.

Even more to the point, Berlin's alternative culture has coalesced into an alternative economy that has everything except its own money. An organization called “Netzwerk” functions as an alternative bank, credit union, and insurance company which helps support a string of over 2,000 alternative

businesses in Berlin—food stores, car repair shops, movie theaters, taxi co-ops, laundries, bakeries, and lending libraries. Alternatives run their own childcare centers, health clinics, counseling centers, and legal aid offices. They deliver milk, run nightclubs, and have their own worker-owned construction collectives.

Each of these operations pays Netzwerk a certain amount of money yearly, like a tithe, and Netzwerk

disburses it where it's needed. Netzwerk is an alternative city budget, paying for this generation's rebuilding program. It's also a welfare fund, supplying aid to alternatives whose politics may have cost them their jobs. (Netzwerk has assisted several Berlin teachers dismissed on political grounds and is partially funding the defense of a radical newspaper editor jailed on charges of conspiracy and sedition.)

The most important aspect of the alternative approach to work and industry is its attention to workers' issues. This has a spillover effect on the nonalternative economy as well: experiments with self-determined work patterns have compelled mainstream companies to match them with part-time and flex-time schedules. Support for alternative values has also made choosing a laundry or a taxi a widely practiced act of common cause.

The AL was officially born in the 1981 city elections, when political morale in Berlin was at its nadir. For the alternatives, one of the aspects that symbolized the decadence of "die Stadt" was the city's housing policies, policies that gave landlords subsidies while 7,000 apartments stood empty and 80,000 people were registered as searching for apartments. (This was all the more poignant since the government of East Berlin guaranteed all of its citizens housing—however shabby.)

Taking matters into their own hands, bands of alternatives "occupied" several empty buildings late in 1980. A year later, nearly 10,000 squatters had 170 buildings under occupation and were busily renovating them in the spirit of "revolution through restoration."

Squatting polarized the city. Police were sometimes vicious in their evictions. The more militant squatters, much to the dismay of the recently elected AL, retaliated with stones and barricades. Sporadic riots punctuated a two-year period, encouraging ghosts from the past. Older Berliners saw Nazi thuggery in the squatters' disregard for property and their intimidating mass demonstrations. Squatters, like all the young in Germany, were sensitive to any signs of authoritarian-

ism. When the public started shouting "Gas them!" and one squatter was accidentally killed during a street riot, the alternatives feared a Fourth Reich was upon them.

While squatting polarized the generations most dramatically, the drama also pointed up a serious political chasm. The young were looking for a political and cultural miracle to match their parents' economic one, but neither side understood the other. "The old parties couldn't answer the questions the young were asking," says Uwe Teitz, 25, a current AL representative. "They didn't even know those questions needed asking." Up until 1981 there wasn't just a generation gap, but a total schism.

The AL stepped into the breach, rallying 90,700 signatures and taking 7 percent of the seats in the Berlin

Messages of transfiguration and discovery leap from Berlin's walls.

parliament—stunning Berlin's gray-clad ward heelers.

The motley and unorthodox party has continued to stun them, introducing "initiatives" and position papers condemning perceived laxity toward civil rights and freedoms of expression. They have also charged some of Germany's largest corporations with exploiting special government subsidies without improving the industrial profile of the city. Although the trade union movement was initially distrustful of the alternatives, "We seemed too young and wet behind the ears," says Teitz, "and so informal"—they have now reached common ground. And recently the Berlin City Senate advanced \$3 million directly to Netzwerk-sponsored projects.

AL was able to intercede in the squatters' battle. Although about half

the squatters were ousted, the city offered many of them contracts to buy the buildings they had occupied. "Squatting may be finished," says one veteran, "but the sense of possibilities for social relationships and living conditions will not go away."

Alternative Berlin's cafe society is fertile with ideas and debate, and has a tangy revolutionary flavor. Every night news vendors barge through the bars with copies of the next day's *tax*, the alternative newspaper. Pamphleteers follow them, igniting endless discussions and polemics. The air is filled with what the Germans call "*die grosse Schnauze*"—big talk. Writers and artists engage themselves politically, unafraid that politics will chase away their muse.

Predictably, some artists are utterly mesmerized by the Wall and the vibrations of discord it gives off. Others concentrate on the struggle to overcome the pervasive estrangement. Berliner Peter Schneider's recent book, *The Wall Jumper* (Pantheon), deals with attempts to find threads tying Berliners on both sides of the Wall together. Schneider faults the "walls in the mind" and the smugness with which each side picks out the faults of the other in order to assert its superiority. Says his narrator: "We fail in our attempt to cure the madness in one state by referring to the madness in another."

The alternatives are as unorthodox in their foreign policy as they are in their intramural affairs. The AL conceive of themselves as agents of détente, not as guards in the "watchtower of liberty." Accordingly, they have called for a military reduction in Berlin—to cut the 12,000 Allied troops stationed there down to a symbolic force of 500. All through last fall, they organized demonstrations and symbolic blockades of U.S. bases in Berlin to protest new missile deployments in West Germany.

Despite these moves, however, the AL is not reflexively anti-American. As Schneider observes, "In Berlin no one is naive about the Soviets."

Alarmed by the growing polarity between the superpowers, the AL is

trying to protect the agreements between East and West Germany—such as liberalized transit rules, better phone contacts, a contract concerning the shared transportation system, and improved trade relations. The alternatives, like many other Germans, believe that greater security will come from enlarging these “holes in the wall”—and from establishing better ties with peace groups and human rights groups in the Eastern Bloc.

On an informal level, the AL is alert to signals from dissident and grass-roots peace groups such as Solidarity, the Czech Charter 77, and peace cells in the East German university town of Jena, a hotbed of the burgeoning underground (not state-sanctioned) East German peace movement. Through its ties with the Protestant Church, the AL has been able to speak with like-minded activists on the other side of the Wall. Many AL members use their transit privileges to attend “blues masses” (Lutheran church services that are a cross between a political discussion and Quaker meeting), which have become the only real forum in East Berlin for a popular peace movement.

Berlin alternatives see normalizing relations between East and West Berlin as a springboard for a larger superpower reconciliation. “Because of Berlin’s complex situation,” says Peter Brandt (whose father, Willy Brandt, was the architect of detente), “it’s easier to see the absolute necessity of political solutions—not military ones. The small holes in the wall—the small steps we’ve taken on a practical level for living in such a bizarre condition—have kept the Cold War from being colder. What we can accomplish here has wider geopolitical significance.” Adds colleague Jorg Ingo Weber, “Berlin has proved an example of the need for cooperation and communication—not to be confrontational, but to talk. Twenty years ago everything now in place would have seemed impossible. Today, despite the superpower standoff, things are possible here that were never possible before.”

—WILLIAM MCGOWAN