

## Symbol of a Brutal Regime? Or a Fun Place to Party?

An exhibition looks back at the Palast der Republik, the East German Parliament building, which was torn down after the country ceased to exist.

By Thomas Rogers

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4 MIN READ

BERLIN — In the center of Berlin, across from the city’s cathedral, one of Germany’s most controversial construction projects is nearing completion. The Humboldt Forum, a new museum housed in a replica of a long-destroyed castle, is set to open this fall.

The project has been plagued by strife, and its leaders have come under fire from activists and academics who say little has been done to research the provenance of colonial-era objects in the museum’s collections.

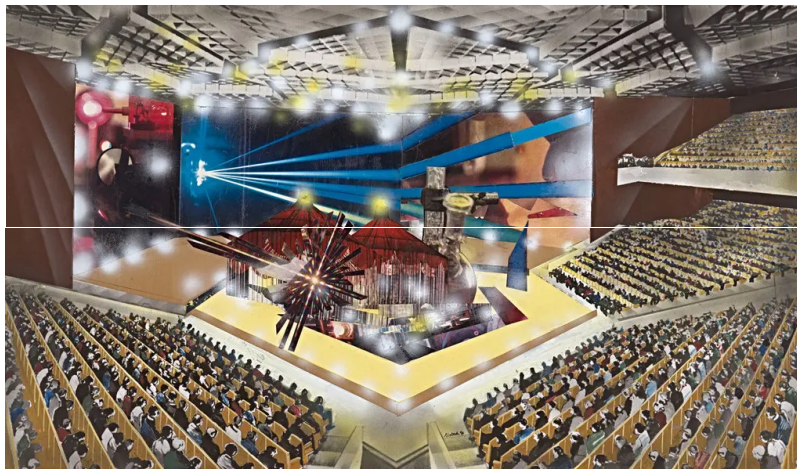
But many longtime Berliners are disdainful of the project for another reason: The Forum occupies the former site of the Palast der Republik, a hulking building that once housed the East German Parliament and that was demolished to make way for the new museum.

For many former East Germans, the decision to tear down one of the architectural showpieces of the German Democratic Republic, or G.D.R., was a form of historical vandalism.

The Kunsthalle Rostock, an art museum in the northeast of Germany, is presenting a new exhibition called “Palast der Republik: Utopia, Inspiration, Politics,” dedicated to the building’s artistic, social and political legacy. The show, running through October 13, features design elements and furniture from the demolished building, as well as art by prominent East German painters that once decorated its walls and artworks it inspired.



Cantilevered chairs and other design items from the Palast der Republik on display at the Kunsthalle Rostock. Klaus Wittkugel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; Kunsthalle Rostock; photo by Fritz Beise



A collage from 1974 by the artist Dieter Urbach depicts a light show in the main hall of the Palast. Dieter Urbach/Berlinische Galerie; Photo by Kai-Annett Becker

The communist G.D.R. was a one-party state where many citizens were systematically monitored by intelligence services and people faced severe consequences if they spoke out against the regime.

But it still arouses nostalgia among some former citizens who fondly remember its gender egalitarianism and social safety net or admire its utopian aspirations.

Three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the former East remains poorer than the rest of Germany, and many residents feel that the promises of reunification were never fulfilled. The region has become a bastion of support for the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany party.

Elke Neumann, the exhibition's curator, said that many Germans have an overly simplistic understanding of East Germany, and that she hoped the exhibition would help people form a more nuanced view of the G.D.R.

"Many people still think everything was black and white," she said in an interview. "It makes sense for people to see what was actually there."



The photographer Sibylle Bergemann captured visitors at the Palast in 1987. Nachlass Sibylle Bergemann/Loock Gallery; Ostkreuz

The Palast was opened in 1976 on the site of the original Berlin Schloss, the centuries-old castle of the Hohenzollern dynasty, which was heavily damaged during World War II. The East German government demolished the building's remains in 1950.

The Palast, meant to embody the ambitions of the new regime, was a Soviet-style rectangular colossus with two large blocks sandwiching a smaller middle section, clad in distinctive bronze-mirrored windows.

A unique mixture of government building and leisure destination, it housed the (largely symbolic) Parliament of the G.D.R., as well as nearly a dozen venues for eating and drinking, a theater, a bowling alley, a post office and a youth club. It also boasted two auditoriums, including a hexagonal space with unique, diagonally retractable seating that allowed it to accommodate events ranging from state dinners to rock concerts.



A photograph taken by Thomas Sandberg in the Palast in 1981. Thomas Sandberg/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/BONO, Oslo

“The building gave East Germans an identity, in a positive sense,” Moritz Holfelder, a journalist who has written a book about the building, said in a phone interview. Although the Palast symbolized a repressive regime, he argued, it was primarily seen as a place for everyday activities: eating, dancing and celebrating family occasions.

“Eighty percent of the people I spoke with from the former G.D.R. told me they loved this building,” Mr. Holfelder said.

Many depictions at the Kunsthalle Rostock exhibition show East Germans’ ordinary uses of the Palast, like the gatherings and parties that were captured by the photographer Thomas Sandberg.



A function in the Great Hall of the Palast, at an unknown date. via Kunsthalle Rostock

Elsewhere in the show, the artists Nina Fischer and Maroan el Sani have reconstructed a portion of the dance floor from the Palast's youth club. The original surface could rise up several inches and rotate while people danced.

After the Berlin Wall came down, the Palast remained in a state of limbo as authorities debated its future. The building was gutted to remove asbestos, and its empty shell became a utopian space for the city's art community.

One project filled the building with 58,000 gallons of water and allowed visitors to travel around it in inflatable boats. In 2005, the Norwegian artist Lars O. Ramberg installed 20-foot letters on the building's roof that spelled out "zweifel," the German word for "doubt," to reflect the sense of uncertainty that followed reunification.

For many, the public debate about what to do about the building was as much about architecture as it was about grappling with the G.D.R.'s legacy. Some in Germany viewed the decision to tear down the Palast as an attempt to erase decades of complex history without fully reckoning with it.

"After reunification, G.D.R. history wasn't worked through in the way the Nazi past was in West Germany," Mr. Holfelder said.



The artists Nina Fischer and Maroan el Sani reconstructed a portion of the revolving dance floor from the Palast's youth center. Nina Fischer/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; Maroan el Sani/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; Kunsthalle Rostock; photo by Fritz Beise

Gertraude Pohl, a designer and artist who was part of the Palast's original interior design team and who has several pieces in the exhibition, said that the 2003 decision by the German parliament to demolish the building was a "national idiocy." In a telephone interview, she said it was "unique" that, in the case of the G.D.R., "as a country went under, so did its culture and architecture."

The Kunsthalle Rostock exhibition also features wallpaper created by the artist Stefanie Bürkle that replicates the facade of the Palast, to represent her belief that the building had become a two-dimensional surface onto which questions about German identity and history were being projected.

In an interview, Ms. Bürkle said the exhibition came at "exactly the right time" to take stock of both the regime's utopian intentions and its grimmer realities.

"I'm against cutsefying it, and against nostalgia for the G.D.R., which was a brutal dictatorship that destroyed people," she said. "The identity of the G.D.R. is not contained in this building alone. It came from all kinds of other things."



Wallpaper by Stefanie Bürkle, based on the façade of the Palast der Republik, in the office of Hortensia Völckers, a German arts administrator. Stefanie Bürkle/Hans Haacke/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; Stiftung Stadtmuseum Berlin

Mr. Holfelder believes that if the Palast's fate were to be decided today, it's unlikely that the building would be demolished in favor of the new Schloss, which he described as a "squalid box."

Germans now have more emotional distance from the G.D.R., he argued, pointing to the fact that the country has been led for nearly a decade and a half by Chancellor Angela Merkel, who grew up in East Germany.

"At some point, maybe we will tear down the Schloss again, and rebuild the Palast der Republik," he said. "From a historical perspective, that would make sense."

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