

Echoes of a Building

Nearly 30 years after the collapse of the GDR and the emergence of a reunited Germany the urban landscape in Berlin still offers many reminders of the time when the Cold War was most acutely experienced in the divided German city.

The massive complex of the buildings that housed the former GDR Main Directorate for Reconnaissance stands out as an architectural monument of the totalitarian East German GDR. Robert Conrad's photos of the abandoned offices, facilities and buildings – taken in 2017 - do not conform to aesthetics of decay. Rather, their understated matter of fact documentary approach offers a powerful visual commentary on what ultimately amounts to the banality of the former totalitarian communist state.

The photos also have an awkward topicality at a time when across the Western world the post war liberal values we have grown up with are increasingly undermined and called into question by populist movements at both ends of the political spectrum.

One of the main tasks of the Ministry of State Security was foreign espionage, which was primarily the responsibility of the Main Directorate for Reconnaissance.

The Main Directorate for Reconnaissance - considered to be an elite organisation within the Ministry of State Security - employed over 4,000 people in Berlin alone coordinating and running over 10,000 agents worldwide. The organisation successfully planted agents in the West German government in Bonn and the European NATO headquarters in Brussels. The organisation was also responsible for psychological warfare and - influenced and guided by the Soviet Secret Service - 'Desinformazija'.

In October 1989, when the end of the GDR was in sight, the Main Directorate of Reconnaissance – alongside other Stasi departments - started the comprehensive destruction of files. Over the following months the long corridors in Building 15 filled up with large amounts of shredded documents.

The buildings occupied by the Directorate of Reconnaissance are situated on the corner of Ruschestraße / Frankfurter Allee in the Lichtenberg district of Berlin, part of the 17 acres occupied by the Ministry of State Security.

Alongside the large number of offices and numerous archiving facilities the buildings also housed armouries and safe rooms. In the basement there was also a sauna for employees. The 13 storey building complex was erected in 1977/78 using prefabricated slabs - a construction method popular in the GDR, as it allowed cheap and fast building.

After the collapse of the GDR the buildings were used by the Deutsche Bahn AG until 2011. From 2015 - 2017 part of the facilities were used to provide temporary accommodation for asylum seekers. Since 2017 the HVA buildings have been empty again and are still awaiting further use.

What is totally absent from these images is people. And yet, the people who sat at the desks from which they supervised agents in the GDR and abroad, the officials who managed the archives documenting the surveillance of their fellow citizens, ironically still form a central part of the scene. Ruthless executors of a totalitarian state, many peoples' lives were turned into misery at their hands, if not worse. Years later, history is redressing the brutality and injustice of this place. The abandoned emptiness of the rooms and corridors posthumously strips the once feared state officials of their power. The banality of empty filing cabinets, wall tiling with broken towel hooks or the once constantly moving paternoster lift, resonates with damning irony. None more so than in Markus Wolff's office on the 9th floor. An empty room, some of the wood panelling come off, only partly drawn net curtains remain of the furnishings. From this room the head of the Main Directorate of Reconnaissance wielded enormous power - at one point bringing about the fall of West German chancellor Willy Brand when a GDR agent planted in the chancellor's immediate staff was exposed.

Describing Robert Conrad merely as architecture photographer would be somewhat misleading and wouldn't do justice to his work. In his photos buildings take on a quality of symbolic markers and milestones in cultural landscapes. Architecture is used as a prism through which he observes and reflects the world around him and the past we leave behind.

Robert Conrad's photos of abandoned, neglected or ruined buildings provide a fascinating critical commentary on life in the former GDR and East Berlin during the final years and collapse of the communist state and since.

Robert Conrad (born 1962) grew up in Greifswald (former GDR). He lives and works in Berlin.

As a young man Robert Conrad became increasingly disillusioned with and critical of the suppressive GDR regime. He creatively channelled his regime criticism through his photography.

Frequently, this brought him into conflict with the authorities. The Stasi kept him under observation and he was barred from studying architecture at university. Surviving on low-level occasional jobs and manual work he travelled extensively in East Germany as a chronicler of life in the communist state.

When, after the collapse of the GDR, Conrad was no longer persona non grata he studied History of Art and Architecture at Berlin University.

Like in so many cases Robert Conrad's Stasi file – when opened up after reunification – chillingly revealed how close he had been sailing to the wind. Notes in the file - advising that the modus operandi with respect to Robert Conrad should be to devise ways to 'criminalise' him with a view to justifying arrest - document the determination and brutality with which the state went after its citizens.

Since 2000 Robert Conrad has been working full time as a photographer. In his work he mainly focuses on architecture and urban landscapes.