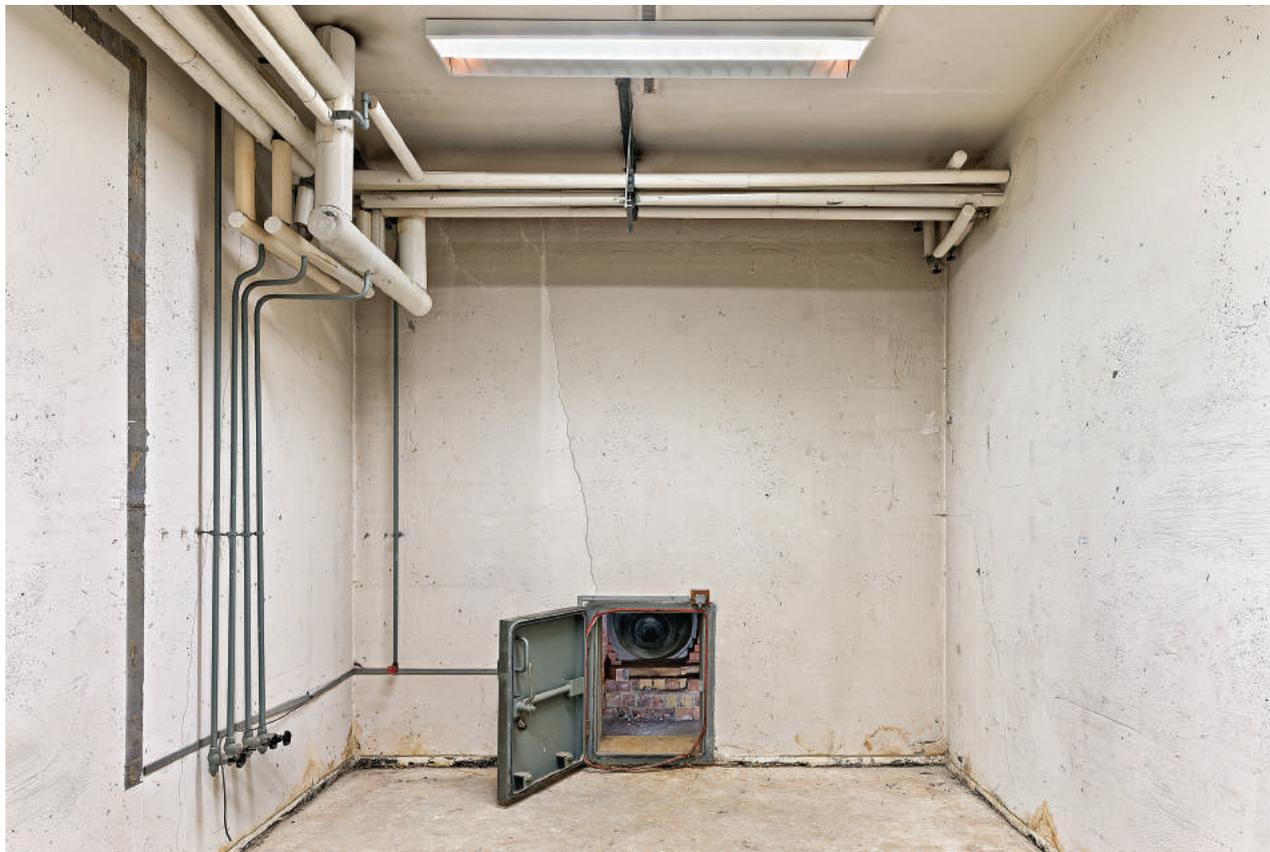


Endframe Echoes of a Building

Words by Alice Zoo

Stasi victim Robert Conrad's work at the former surveillance HQ reveals an extraordinary yet very ordinary past

Basement
Emergency Exit,
North Wing ©
Robert Conrad.



"It is astonishing what presence the old architecture, furniture and facilities – even the smell of the past – can sometimes still have," says Robert Conrad, whose *Echoes of a Building* series is currently being shown at the online exhibition space, the Albumen Gallery, until 31 October.

The photographer grew up in East Germany during the Cold War, and his early use of photography to agitate against the regime and its failings did not escape the notice of those in power. "The Stasi treated me as an enemy of the state. On occasion, they confiscated my passport. Search warrants, police interviews and confiscated negatives became part of my daily life," he recalls. His dogged dedication to the documentary cause is even more remarkable as a result. Just as his application to leave the country was accepted, the Berlin Wall fell.

Thirty years later, Conrad returned to document a seat of the surveillance state he endured as a young man: the Main Directorate for Reconnaissance, a building complex in Berlin that formerly housed the GDR's foreign intelligence service, and which today is almost

remarkable in its ordinariness. His project is a survey of these buildings and their interiors, the corridors and empty rooms that housed so many Stasi operations. "I am always fascinated by the discrepancy between before and after," Conrad reflects. "I want to convey in my photo series the historical climate that characterised the buildings." The research portion of the work was crucial, ensuring that the project would bridge the gap between past and present. Once this phase was complete, the shooting itself took only a few days. Rather than being simply an aesthetic survey of decay, of crumbling historical buildings, the work intends to communicate the place's significance and enduring mood.

Conrad's work for architectural firms, and their "high standards of documentary objectivity", has a clear bearing on the series. His approach is thorough, plain, with complete neutrality of palette, the kind of visual vocabulary recognisable in estate agent windows. He cites influences such as Bernd and Hilla Becher and Nadav Kander, photographers adept at surveying a building's grandiosity within the borders of

a photograph. It is easy to compare Conrad's work to Andreas Gursky, too, when looking at the first images in the work: the geometric regularity of the buildings' exterior, their imposing anonymity. However, *Echoes of a Building* contains at least one grace note of subjectivity: every doorway or barrier within the work swings wide open. He explains: "Open doors symbolise that the documented places have lost their original character of terror. The wind blows through the deserted rooms."

The project moves systematically from the outside of the buildings towards the inside, moving from the higher floors down to the extensive basement complex; its saunas and plunge pools and conference rooms. Conrad is meticulous, turning his lens to control panels and peeling wallpaper; it is a forensic eradication of the secrecy and shadows that characterised the buildings' original symbolism, reflecting its own surveillance back on itself. In the exhibition's last two images, we see an emergency exit [above], followed by an escape tunnel; we inhabit the world, searchingly, and then find a swift route out. **BJP**

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