

Berlin stays cool under capitalism

The German capital is a city divided by style, says Sue Chester, with an address in the east now considered über-fashionable

It's now 25 years since the German Democratic Republic (GDR) held its first free elections, ending the split between East and West Berlin and unifying the city after decades of division. During that time, West Berlin's neon ads shone capitalism across the Wall and over the East's 50 shades of beige.

In the past 25 years, the city's east-west division has been turned upside down, with neighbourhood dynamics changing. The former east's late 19th-century Prenzlauer Berg quarter was once notorious for its grey, cracked apartment block facades with coal fires in kitchens and communal lavatories on each floor. East Berliner tenants were delighted to move farther east in the Seventies, to Marzahn, Lichtenberg and Hohenschönhausen's "Plattenbau" slab blocks, which offered bathrooms and central heating.

These Ossie prefab districts, once bland, have now been refurbished in bright colours and are considered safer, better neighbourhoods than high-rise estates in the former West, such as Reinickendorf and Spandau.

Meanwhile, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, Prenzlauer Berg's central location and historical charm have made it a magnet for wealthy young professionals and families.

Former West Berlin's Kreuzberg, wedged at the southern section of the Wall, became a dead-end. It was where immigrants and artists lived in affordable housing cheek-by-jowl with squatters, a trashy mix that became quintessentially Berlin.

Known as X-Berg, it's now a fairly affluent district. The new urban equivalent is on the other side of the River Spree in the former GDR, Friedrichshain. It's here that one of Berlin's newest luxury high-rise offerings is

nearing completion. Squeezed between the Wall's East Side Gallery and the Spree, it's a 14-storey eye-catcher offering 360-degree views of Berlin.

Located in Berlin's "Media Spree" – a master plan that will include a 14-screen Cineplex, shopping centre and three hotels – residents will be able to stroll across the river footbridge to Kreuzberg's restaurants or watch the tourist boats go by from the complex's riverside café. The crowning glory will be a 5,000-pixel LED strip, to be used for light-installation art or advertising that could fund the resident's concierge service. Apartments range from €362,900 (£264,992) for a 60 sq m one-bedroom property facing Warsaw Bridge, to €6 million (£4.381 million) for a 498 sq m penthouse with views over the centre of Berlin.

Berlin's pre-Wall, dual city centres have been replaced by

'It's like being in New York. It's bombastic, full of energy and history'



Eastern blocks: Prenzlauer Berg is attracting young professionals

the city's new centre, Mitte, which stretches between Alexanderplatz, Tiergarten, Torstrasse and Leipzigerstrasse.

Peter Rabitz, director of premium real estate at Zabel Property Group, specialising in sought-after Prenzlauerberg and Mitte areas, says: "Prices have been reaching €15,000 (£10,954) or more per square metre in these districts, which is crazy for Berlin. It's demand from foreigners who want to be central, near the sights and the action, although with an average of €3,800-€4,500 (£2,775-£3,286), prices are still way below those of London or Paris. Capital growth is also strong at 12 per cent in Mitte, although for many foreigners investing in Berlin, it is more about parking your money safely."

Seconds from Friedrichstrasse is Mitte's rival to the former West's city centre shopping area, Kurfürstendamm, now known as City West. Palais Varnhagen (palais-varnhagen.de) is a new development by architects David Chipperfield as a nod to Berlin's 19th-century salon heritage. There will be 53 Salon Apartments, so-called for their roomy 26-80 sq m living areas (145 sq m for the penthouses) that will allow residents to entertain in luxury.

Quintessentially Berlin, though in a different way, is the Stalinist post-war building project that lines Karl-Marx-Allee, the GDR's parade boulevard. Affectionately known as the gingerbread buildings for their light-brown, Meissen-tiled facades and grand columns skirting the top floor, the roomy apartment blocks were painstakingly built from Second World War rubble by Berliners who were then given the privilege of living at the elite address.

Screenwriter Isabelle Winckler, 44, and her partner and two children live in one of these classical Stalinist show-homes.



Sky's the limit: Berlin's property market is rising, as is the 14-storey Media Spree, overlooking the city's communist-era television tower

From two apartments bought three years apart, they created a 196 sq m home with three bedrooms, two living rooms, a large kitchen and two bathrooms.

After being forced to leave their rented home in Mitte when a developer bought their building to refurbish and sell on as condos, the couple decided to buy. As a Wessie, Isabelle had lived in Berlin for 25 years and dreamt of living in one of the monumental buildings, now considered hip.

"There's a feeling of capital city here. When you stand by the window, it's like being in New York. It's bombastic, full of energy and full of history because the people who built these believed in communism. We have neighbours from all over the world. The Stalin stigma has gone; everybody thinks these apartments are cool," says Isabelle.

On the market for €1.1 million (£802,000), the sixth-floor home has the distinctive socialist charm of large hallway, high ceilings and dual-aspect views. To the front, it overlooks Karl-Marx-Allee's

Frankfurter Tor and former GDR parade ground; to the back is a panoramic Berlin cityscape.

Now that their children go to schools in Mitte, the couple are selling and moving back, this time as home owners.

Other Mitte developments include A Space (aspace.berlin), close to Prenzlauer Berg, minutes

from Berlin's Mauer Park Wall memorial on Bernauer Strasse. This was where residents jumped from their apartment windows into the West in the first days after the wall was erected in August 1961. Originally a brewery, the 60-unit development is being renovated to retain its loft feel with restored brickwork and vast

windows. Buyers can choose interiors from six options for a luxury take on Berlin's "trashy-chic" urban lifestyle. Prices range from €138,894 to €1.55 million (£101,377-£1.31 million).

For a property with a tranquil, village feel, Klostergärten (klostergaerten.de) is a six-storey newbuild of 58 elegant apartments priced at €244,000 to €1.59 million (£178,159-£1.16 million). The homes, each with a balcony or terrace, are in Klosterviertel, near the medieval city wall.

Star design and architectural brands are also muscling in on Mitte. Philippe Starck is already in town with Yoo Berlin (yooberlin.com), penthouses for sale at €27,000 per sq m (£19,725). Daniel Libeskind's architectural statement Sapphire will house 70 apartments from €210,060 (£153,478) at the northern end of Chausseestrasse. And Frank Gehry is set to design the first high-rise residence of the Kollhoff master plan at Alexander Platz.



Writing's on the wall: property in Berlin's edgy east is in demand