

THE

GREAT

DIVIDE

AT THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL, THREE PHOTOGRAPHERS WHO WERE THERE TELL US ABOUT CAPTURING SOME OF THE UGLIEST AND MOST BEAUTIFUL MOMENTS IN HUMAN HISTORY

WORDS THOMAS HOBBS
'NOW' PHOTOGRAPHS ANTONY SOJKA

At the
Brandenburg
Gate, the famous
symbol of the
city, West
Berliners climb on
the Wall in Daniel
Biskup's 1989
photograph

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It's easy to forget just how brutal the Berlin Wall was. A grey concrete hulk that ran for 43.5km (27 miles) through the city, the Wall stood from 1961 till 1989. The Anti-Fascist Protection Rampart, as its east German builders officially called it, separated two very different ideologies, with the authoritarian communism of the Soviet-controlled German Democratic Republic (GDR) effectively using the Wall to block the influence of the more liberal, capitalist, US-controlled West Berlin.

The Wall had 302 guard towers and 55,000 landmines to stop anyone getting too close. It resulted in hundreds of deaths, mostly from people being shot attempting to cross from one side to the other. For photographers, taking pictures of the Wall wasn't always easy and could result in arrest or being shot also, particularly if they were based in the east of the city. But with the whole world watching, recording it was vital and an opportunity to capture humanity at its very worst and best (like when it finally fell after 10,316 days on 9 November 1989).

As the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Wall draws near, we meet three photographers who were drawn to it from very different angles. Through their work, we're reminded of how much Berlin has changed into the free-spirited and vibrant city it is today. >

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DANIEL BISKUP: THE WEST BERLINER



A self-taught photojournalist who documented the collapse of communism around Europe.

Why was it so important to photograph the Wall?

I was studying history and politics in Augsburg, which is very close to Munich. I just felt like I had to go, whether there were magazines who wanted my images or not. I wasn't just taking these photos for then, but for the future too. I was just a historian with a camera.

I love your shot of people standing on top of the wall with Brandenburg Gate in the background [p68]. Was there an electricity in the air?

Just two days before I took that image in 1989, you would get shot if you climbed up on that wall, yet here were

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Checkpoint Charlie was a famous crossing between East and West Berlin in the Friedrichstadt district

hundreds of people standing there. So much had changed in just 24 hours and I remember the soldiers were confused. There was just this feeling that a new future was coming. The hairs stuck up on your neck. I was being kissed by strangers. Just a day before, the country was closed off, but now it was free.

Do you feel like the bright future that was promised has materialised?
Because of all the political fighting >

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between the two sides, when the Wall came down, 80% of people in the East were unemployed. You know, to suddenly have to change everything wasn't easy. Even though the Wall wasn't there, the divide continued, as it was two very different ways of life. The East was still in a lot of pain and it wasn't easy for the people to suddenly be free. I'm sure many of them missed the community they had before. Of course, it was good that the Wall

came down, but as a photographer I miss how Berlin used to look too. It's now become homogenised and just like any other major city. I'm not so sure those kids I photographed on the Wall in 1989 would really recognise the Berlin of 2019. >

“To change everything after the Wall wasn't easy”

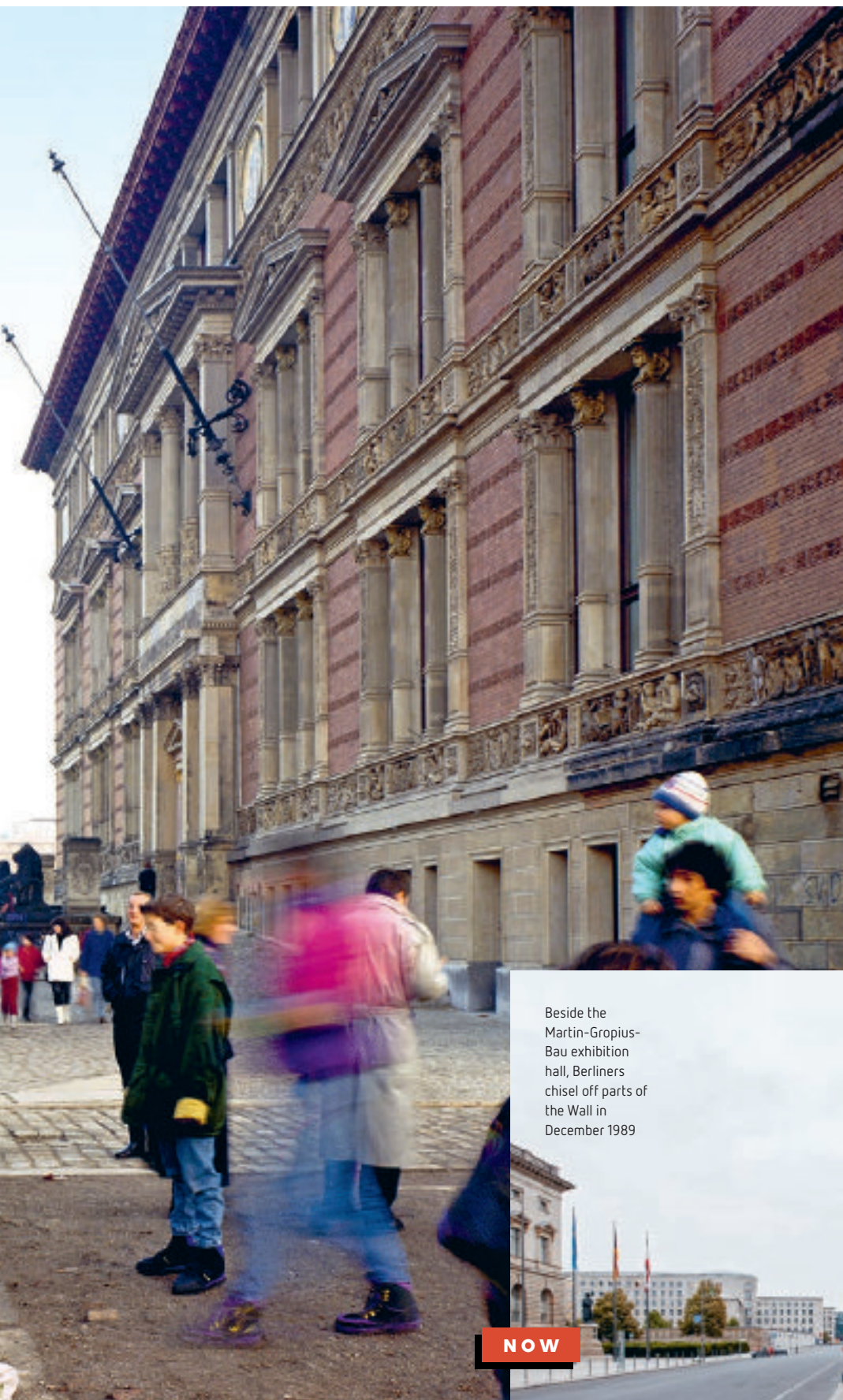
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At the Wall's widest point (3m), West Berliners look to the East in November 1989

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BRIAN ROSE: THE OUTSIDER



Brian majors in architectural photography and lives in New York City. He first visited the Wall in 1985.

As a young American, what made you move to Berlin?

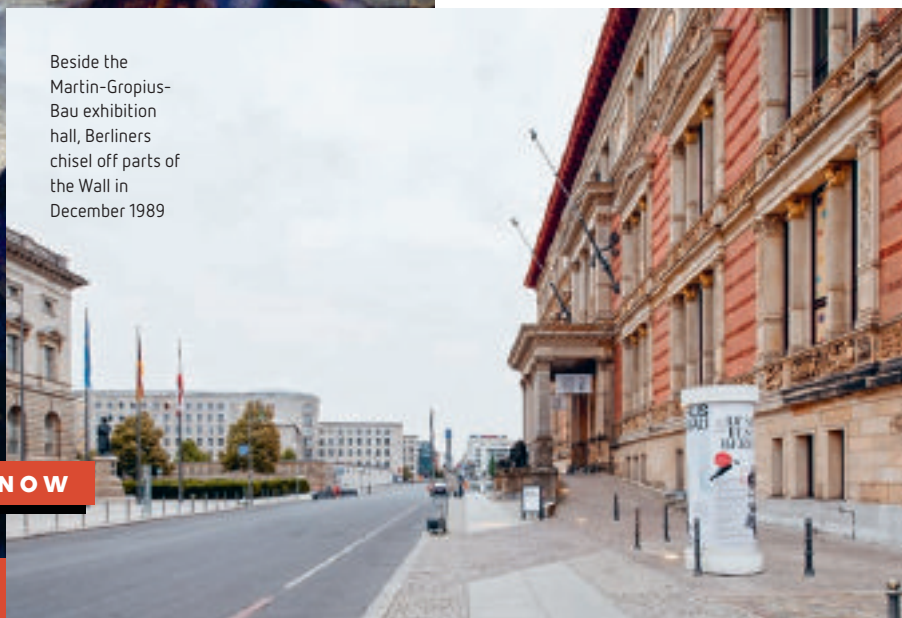
I was living in New York in the early 1980s, mostly photographing Wall Street and the Lower East Side of the city. I wanted to expand my horizons. In 1985 I decided to go to Berlin, as at that time it felt like the centre of the universe. So many young artists poured in, as you could get studio spaces for next to nothing. In my work, I like to treat the buildings as characters and the Wall was so villainous. I guess it drew me in.

What were your first impressions when you saw it?

Actually standing there opposite the Wall was quite devastating. I had never seen something so nakedly brutal. It was an amazing thing to see too: this idea that you could separate a whole continent and surround the city in West Berlin was unparalleled and hard to get a grip on. I'm an architectural photographer by trade and I guess I was fascinated by how apocalyptic it looked. It was a >

Beside the Martin-Gropius-Bau exhibition hall, Berliners chisel off parts of the Wall in December 1989

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“I was fascinated by how apocalyptic Berlin looked. It was a city under siege”

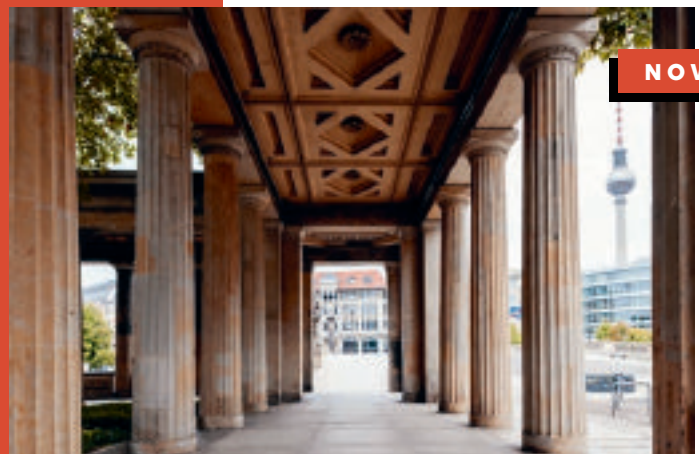
city under siege. Either side there were people living such different lives and there was something voyeuristic about capturing all of this. I have a photograph with the word *Überleben*, which means ‘to survive’, written on the Wall alongside colourful graffiti of kids’ drawings [p78]. I found it amazing that such colour existed among all this drabness.

Was there a sense that the Wall might be permanent?

That was the conventional wisdom at the time. I remember *The New York Times* >

A colonnade at the Alte Nationalgalerie, 1987, showing Berlin’s famous TV tower and a Trabant, the motorised symbol of East Germany

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THEN PHOTO BRIAN ROSE

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The west side of
the Wall in
Kreuzberg, 1987.
The graffiti
Überleben means
'to survive'

running a piece that said it was 'just part of the furniture of Europe', but I didn't agree with that. When you photograph buildings for a living, you know that they will come down eventually. That's why I tried to get so many shots. For me, it was always a race against time.

Were you in Berlin when the Wall finally fell?

Unfortunately, I wasn't, but I got back and celebrated New Year's Eve '89 in Berlin, and I felt so alive being there. At that point you could see holes forming in the Wall where people were chipping away at it and it felt like the whole world had come to Berlin. There was a sense that the city hadn't properly healed from WWII, particularly the East, which still showed signs of being bombed, but the Wall coming down gave everybody hope of a brighter future, even if that didn't necessarily materialise. One of the fascinating things about the Berlin Wall is, even though it's no longer there, it carries on in people's minds. There's a symbolism to it that persists. >



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ROBERT CONRAD: THE EAST BERLINER



A Berlin-based photographer who now specialises in museum, architecture and art projects.

So often we hear perspectives from people in West Berlin, but you were living in the East. What was it like?

I'm from a small town in the north-east of Germany, but I moved to East Berlin in 1986 and lived there. As a photographer, I would shoot a lot of the architecture, but I got in trouble with the East Berlin government, as

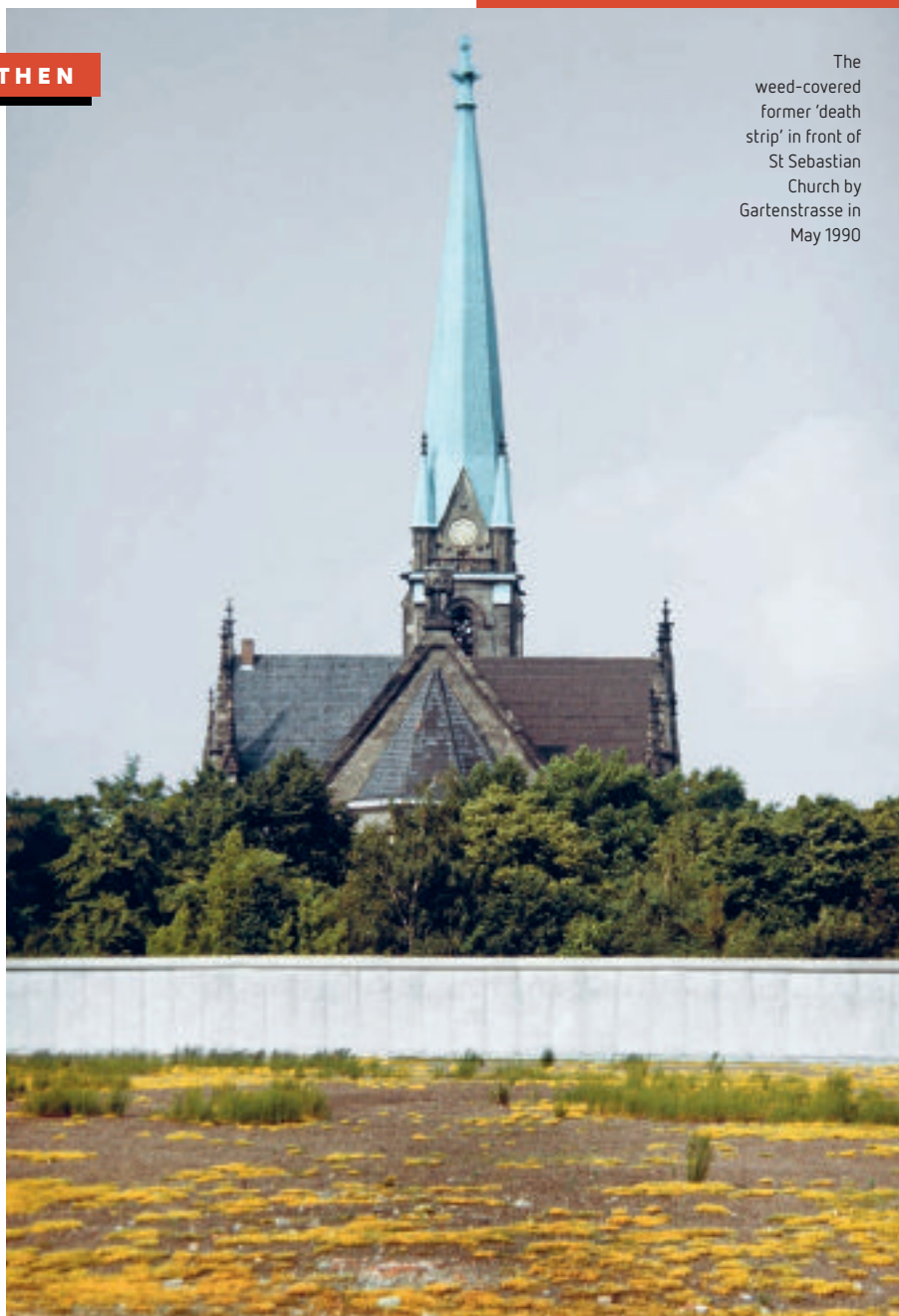


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The 'death strip' that ran beside the Wall, with Neukölln tower blocks in the background and Treptow allotments in front

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The weed-covered former 'death strip' in front of St Sebastian Church by Gartenstrasse in May 1990

“I knew people had been shot dead in some of the places I took photos”

I showed how they were ripping down a lot of historic buildings. It was a very authoritarian regime with a lot of fear, and I knew I had to get out as soon as I could and move to the West of the city. I met this girl from California on my travels and she offered to marry me so that I could move out of East Berlin. That was my plan.

Was it dangerous to photograph the Wall at this time?

It was a fascinating city to photograph, as the hangover from WWII was everywhere, whether that was old rotten buildings or the lost infrastructure from the Nazis. It >



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was like being in a museum in the East, somewhere that hadn't progressed from 1949. It was strange, because I knew people had been shot dead in some of the places where I took my photos, such as the no-man's land that ran through the middle. If you

were found with pictures you could get put in prison for two years, so there was fear and they stole a lot of my photos. In 1987, I took a lot of the photos you see now and buried them in my garden, as I didn't want them to get confiscated. I knew they would be important in the future.

When you think back, what's your overriding feeling?

I think the main message is that people can make it through oppression. There was a point where nobody said this would happen, but it did. We ran a lot of demonstrations and the resilience paid off. My favourite photo that I took of the Wall was in 1990. It shows St Sebastian Church next to Gartenstrasse [p82], which towers over the Wall. It shows if you have faith and hope you can defeat anything. >

The 'death strip' and a former watchtower in Zimmerstrasse, Berlin Mitte, March 1990

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COME TOGETHER

IT'S 30 YEARS SINCE THE BERLIN WALL WAS TOPPLED AND THE CITY IS CELEBRATING. HERE ARE FIVE CONCRETE WAYS YOU CAN TOAST THE FALL

THE FESTIVAL

For a whole week, this multi-platform shindig will include over a hundred happenings across seven locations that were pivotal to the city's 'Peaceful Revolution'. There's live music, including Patti Smith and Daniel Barenboim, a floating art installation featuring 30,000 personal messages, gargantuan 3D projections and a mind-bending augmented-reality smartphone app. It's going to be smashing. 4-10 Nov. mauerfall30.berlin



From the top: A photograph from *East Berlin: Half a Capital*; art installation at the Brandenburg Gate; actors from the play *#BerlinBerlin*



THE EXHIBITION

What was life like on the other side of the Wall? *East Berlin: Half a Capital* explores the everyday experiences of ordinary people living in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), touching on everything from Socialist architecture to skateboarding. Until 9 Nov. ost.berlin

THE PLAY

Meet Ingo, a hapless young man born on the day the Wall went up. Journey with him as his hometown and family are torn asunder by the barricade. Infused with wit and a killer rock soundtrack, *#BerlinBerlin* is an award-winning new work by playwrights from both sides of the city. With English subtitles. 9 Nov. theater-strahl.de

THE SCREENING

Glimpse into the GDR during that period after the Wall came down, but before reunification began in earnest. *Berlin Prenzlauer Berg – Encounters between 1st of May and 1st of July 1990*, showing at the House of Representatives, deftly balances its subjects' melancholy for what's being lost with optimism for newfound freedoms. Free entry. 12 Nov.

THE CLUB NIGHT

Party like it's 1989, except with monster tunes from trance DJ Priit Kuusik and lush psychedelic soundscapes courtesy of Katja Adrikova at nightclub Kater Blau. Come in like a wrecking ball (ahem) on Saturday but, considering it goes on until the Monday, don't worry if at some point you hit a wall. 9-11 Nov. katerblau.de

easyJet flies to Berlin from 102 destinations.