

# “Unbuilding Walls – From Death Strip to Free Space”.

## Exhibition in the German Pavilion at the 16th International Architecture Biennale of Venice 2018

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For 28 years, since 1990, Germany has been united – exactly as long as the Berlin Wall existed (1961–1989). On the occasion of this parallel, the exhibition “Unbuilding Walls” responds to current debates on nations, protectionism and division. The exhibition and the catalogue take the historical parallel as an opportunity to explore the effects of division and the process of healing as a dynamic spatial phenomenon. With reference to “Freespace,” the central theme of the Architecture Biennale proposed by Graft Architects, special focus will be given to outstanding examples of urban and architectural design that address aspects of division and integration.

*Iron Curtain and Green Belt. Networks and Opportunities for Cooperation in a European Border Landscape* is the title of the international conference that we want to open tonight on the occasion of the European Cultural Heritage Summit 2018 in Berlin. The subtitle of the current installation in the German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale reads *“From Death Strip to Free Space”* and refers to a similar approach of re-evaluation of localities and of changing our perception of space. Based on the guiding theme of the European Cultural Heritage Year 2018 “border areas – encounter areas” prospects of an intensified border-crossing cooperation and a reinterpretation of former border regions can be explored.

By analysing architectural projects along and on the former border strip of the Iron Curtain the question of what happened on this unprecedented void in the middle of the re-united German capital is examined. The heterogeneity of the multitude of approaches, typologies, protagonists, and results show the

breadth of architectural debates and solutions. Taking the experience of the inner-German Wall as a starting point, the exhibition will also examine historical as well as current barriers, fences and walls beyond Germany’s specific national perspective. In the course of the preparations for Unbuilding Walls a team of journalists travelled to border walls around the world. This work will be shown at the German Pavilion as well.

### Introduction

People have been building walls since mankind became sedentary — to protect themselves, to keep safe what is theirs and to give spatial definition to a sense of belonging. Every wall therefore postulates an “us” and “them”. Walls divide. Whether walls are good or bad, and for whom, depends on the reason why they were built and on the function and meaning they assume. Do they serve to protect people or do they limit their freedom and render it worthless? In the latter case, walls become prisons, instruments of exclusion and division that separate what was formerly connected. This applies to the wall built in 1961 by the GDR government around West Berlin and along the inner-German border to prevent people living in their territory from leaving. At most, its protective function served those in power. For the people of the GDR it was imprisoning.

The Berlin Wall, in particular, quickly took on a symbolic meaning over and above that of the actual construction. It represented not only the division of a city and the division of



*Figs.1-3: Impressions of the exhibition “Unbuilding Walls” at the Architecture Biennale in Venice 2018 (photos: Jan Bitter, Berlin)*



an entire country, but became a synonym for the division of the European continent through the Iron Curtain and for the East-West opposition worldwide. The Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain also came to symbolise state repression, forcible separation, autocratic despotism and the inhuman potential of a political ideology. The walls in this world seal off authoritarian regimes from the rest of the world with a border that is frequently deadly, or are the product of decades of conflict, failed diplomacy, or a lack of will or ability to seek and find peaceful and humane solutions. Since February 5, 2018, the Wall that divided Germany for 28 years has been gone longer than it was there. This symmetrical moment in history presents an opportunity to reflect on developments in the former border space since the fall of the Wall. The Wall and its border installations were a space that eradicated all traces of the past in order to turn it into a deadly zone that would hinder any attempt at fleeing the GDR. A year after the peaceful revolution brought about the fall of the Wall on November 9, 1989, this military zone lay empty between the two parts of the now reunified country, like a vast open wound. At the same time, it also represented a

unique opportunity to shape the process of the growing together of the city and country, both spatially and programmatically.

### **From a No Man's Land to a Space of Development**

Looking back, we can see a complex variety of different approaches. The revolution and the fall of the Wall happened suddenly, catching both German states unprepared. There was no master plan for the path towards unity. As in many other areas of society during the process of reunification, the work of the planning disciplines was not entirely even-handed, which left many GDR citizens unhappy and to this day has been the cause of some resentment and social tension. Where the Wall and former death strip used to be, the intention was to create free spaces. Alongside state-initiated gestures of connection, such as Axel Schultes' design for the Federal Ribbon, a complex process of democratic wrangling ensued about the future

of this new urban space that took many forms. Should one be allowed to live on a former death strip? Should one eradicate this brutal, built testimony to a difficult and contentious period of German history or should it be kept for future generations? The approaches to dealing with the space left behind by the Wall are rife with ambivalent situations: East and West, separation and connection, prominence or integration, forgetting or commemorating, occupying or leaving empty, winning or losing, reconstructing or transforming. Within these fields of tension, solutions have since been found that are sometimes a conscious coexistence of old and new, sometimes a connection of the two, and sometimes also something entirely new and surprising.

The pluralism of architectural approaches along the former death strip over the last 28 years is the built manifestation of this debate. It documents a struggle for self-conception and identity – of the respective protagonists as well as of reunified Germany and its people as a whole. For us its variety is an expression of richness, a testament to a vibrant, pluralistic society. At the same time, this process is still ongoing: walls that have been overcome still cast a long shadow. The urban and architectural concepts are inseparably bound up with the social upheavals and transformations in the former GDR, with the success of reunification and also with the disruptions and changes of direction in people's personal lives. The "wound" that resulted from the Wall and the death strip must heal, and not just along the former border. It has been and will continue to be a highly complex social, economic and cultural process that is by no means finished. Statistical surveys show that the country is in many respects still alarmingly imbalanced, whether in the distribution of power, earnings or voting patterns. So, how can one dismantle walls?

Physically, spatially and mentally: how do we rebuild walls?

In the current climate of renewed debate on nations and nationalism, protectionism and segregation, our consideration of the experience of the inner-German border and the many areas in which it continues to resonate today gains new relevance. As the world grows ever more connected, new walls are being discussed and built that separate people from one another. In a world in which trade is global, in which personal communications function on a global scale and in which the threat of rapid climate change can only be tackled together, populist calls for exclusion and restriction seem absurd. Nevertheless, they find a broad echo: the more we are connected, the more it breeds desire on the one hand and a fear of loss on the other with regard to possessions, standing and identity. The new walls that are appearing are above all an expression of socio-political changes and an unwillingness, or an incapacity, to enter into dialogue. New dividing lines are arising in people's minds: walls of opinions signalling an end to communications, an unwillingness to listen and hardened fronts of opinion. Such tendencies are a threat to free societies founded on pluralism, tolerance of diversity, and mutual respect in interactions.

Perhaps it is not possible to prevent walls entirely. Wherever they appear, however, they are a sign of crisis – of a breakdown in communications, of the inability to meet hate and injustice with civil means. This is where every one of us can play a role in breaking down the walls in our minds. From our experience of the wall built in Germany and of overcoming it after 28 years, we can derive an important message: walls cast long shadows – even when walls are torn down, the invisible divisions they create remain tangible for a long time.





*Fig. 4: The curators of the exhibition “Unbuilding Walls - From Death Strip to Free Space” in the German Biennale Pavilion in Venice 2018 (photo: Jan Bitter / Graft Architects)*

<sup>1</sup> Exhibition “Unbuilding Walls – Vom Todesstreifen zum freien Raum / From Death Strip to Freespace” curated by Lars Krückeberg, Wolfram Putz and Thomas Willemeint of GRAFT, together with Marianne Birthler, former Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the former German Democratic Republic. – Catalogue “Unbuilding Walls - Vom Todesstreifen zum freien Raum / From Death Strip to Freespace” (Birkhäuser Verlag 2018), edited by Marianne Birthler, Lars Krückeberg, Wolf-

ram Putz and Thomas Willemeint, with a foreword by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and with essays by Marianne Birthler, Michael Cramer, Scilla Elworthy, Kristin Feireiss, Axel Klausmeier, John Kornblum, Thomas Krüger, Michael Pils, Jochen Sandig, Hans Stimmann, Wolfgang Tiefensee, as well as Lars Krückeberg, Wolfram Putz, and Thomas Willemeint; in addition interviews with Daniel Libeskind and Bruno Flierl.