

On the Auction Block in Berlin: A Piece of History

Haus Schwarzenberg, Home To Artists, Jewish Museum, Will Go Up for Sale—Again

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THIS CITY, FACING a wall of debt valued at tens of billions of euros, apparently can't afford to be nostalgic about its landmarks.

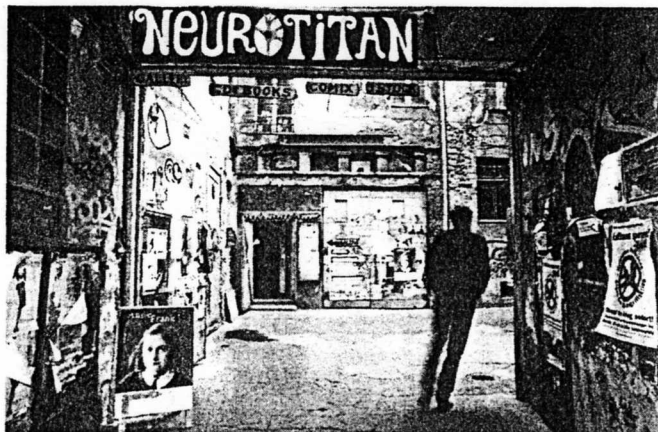
Just recently, the city announced that prospective buyers of the Admiralspalast, a turn-of-the-century complex of theaters and cabarets near Friedrichstrasse Station, are free to tear it down, regardless of its historic-building status.

Then there is Haus Schwarzenberg, home to artists, galleries, publishing houses, an art-house cinema and a distributor of avant-garde musical recordings. The structure is redolent of Berlin atmosphere and history and is located just steps away from Europe's first Starbucks. On April 24, Haus Schwarzenberg went on the auction block in the best-publicized Berlin land deal in some time. The auction closed without an offer; another one is scheduled in six months.

The house, at Rosenthaler Strasse 39, is a couple of buildings and a long, L-shape alleyway. One building is from the 1880s, but the majority of the property is from the 1920s. The older building housed the workshop of Otto Weidt, whose operation employed blind and deaf people to make brooms and brushes, a traditional occupation for the handicapped. Mr. Weidt, however, also took in Jews as laborers, hiding their prohibited status (and, on occasion, the Jews themselves, in a specially constructed hiding place) while doing what he could to get them to safety. In the years from 1941 to 1943, more than 30 Jews passed through this tiny workshop before it closed.

After the war, the heirs of these Jews banded together to purchase Rosenthaler Strasse 39. But, echoing many cases in postunification Germany, the ownership group has split into factions: one wants to get rid of the property, another one wants to hold on to it and improve it and a third wants to maintain the status quo.

It would all be just another real-estate squabble if not for the unusual collection of people who have made Haus Schwarzenberg what it is today. In the mid-1990s, it was just another back alley, grimy and brown, with some of the facade falling off, but full of the kind of large industrial spaces artists love. Located in the so-called Spandauer Vorstadt neighborhood in central Berlin, near the burgeoning galleries of Auguststrasse and the narrow streets on the other side of Rosenthaler Strasse where artists found ultracheap apartments, it became a magnet. In 1995, with the owners' help, some of the artists who had studios there organized a nonprofit company to oversee the property.



The inner courtyard of Haus Schwarzenberg in Berlin, home to artists, galleries and an art-house cinema.

Photo: Constance Hanna

Bit by bit, the tenants became more varied. An avant-garde publishing house moved in, as did a two-screen art cinema. Later, a retail shop specializing in odd music and comics moved in. A quiet, unmarked bar opened, decorated by Dead Chickens, an art group based in the complex and specializing in motorized, metallic grotesques, often sporting flesh-like rubber "skin." Two Internet service providers took over an old garage. Some of the heirs organized an exhibition in Mr. Weidt's old space, titled it "Blind Faith," and placed a plaque on the ground at the mouth of the alleyway in Mr. Weidt's memory.

It wasn't unusual, at least not back then. Several nearby courtyards had the same funky feel, like the one housing the Berlin/Tokyo Gallery, a basement art gallery and performance space with a bar that was the site of some of the most impressive musical activity in Berlin. It also was a launching pad for young artists who later moved on to literal above-ground status.

But none of these other courtyards was organized the way Haus Schwarzenberg was. Berlin/Tokyo vanished almost overnight three years ago. One by one, these spaces disappeared, construction crews moved in, buildings were scrubbed and renovated, and the For Rent signs went up. Many of them remain.

One secret of Haus Schwarzenberg's success was its mixture of private and public space. The Central cinema, for instance, is part of a local chain noted for putting on obscure first-run quality films in the original language and hosting the occasional festival.

"The housing authority heard we were looking for a place around here," says Andreas Doehler, the Central's manager, "and it was love at first sight. The location was perfect, and it seemed like there was always something developing. And we like the sense of connectedness that happens with the tenants here."

The Central has done well since its opening in April 1996, with a large part of its clientele drawn from the neighborhood. The bar—oddly named Eschlo-raque, Rümshrümp—also has been a favorite meeting place for artists and musicians. The Japanese-Berlin connection is thriving here as well, thanks to the Murata & Friends Gallery, known to Japanese artists as "the other Japanese Embassy."

The private spaces, too, have been successful. Laura Kikauka is a Canadian-born artist who makes installations out of thousands of pieces of kitsch, and since setting up her studio here eight years ago, she has exhibited around the world. "You almost don't have to leave this building," she said. "There's a grocery store across the street, you have

movies, a bar It's a fantastic place for working: It's industrial, but it's also quiet at night. You tend to meet the other people and that's resulted in some interesting collaborations. You also know that if you need to borrow a hammer at 3 a.m., someone can loan it to you."

"Our plan is to spend a million euros renovating this place," said Heinrich Dubel, an artist who has volunteered his services to the nonprofit organization as media agent. "We'll keep the look, because it's a window into history. A million euros? Yes, we can get it. One of the points we're making is that we're not a bunch of poor artists: we have over 100 jobs here, people who aren't on unemployment, who are working and earning good money."

It isn't just artists anymore: The Weidt workshop has become a satellite of Berlin's renowned Jewish Museum, and in this past September, Berlin's Anne Frank Center, a foundation that educates high-school students about Jewish history and the Holocaust, moved into Haus Schwarzenberg.

Meanwhile, a nightmare vision of a potential future is just around the corner: Walk out of Haus Schwarzenberg, turn left past Starbucks, and enter the Rosenhöfe, the neighborhood's latest development. Painted pink, it features a vaguely Indian-themed bar and a half-dozen upscale clothing shops. There are plenty of gawkers, but apart from sales assistants, the shops are empty.

Since few of the locals can afford the pricey stuff, the shops depend on tourists, but tourists don't come to Berlin to shop. They come to see Berlin, places like the Brandenburg Gate, the Reichstag, and, yes, Haus Schwarzenberg, with its funky walls, Dead Chickens monstrosities and museum that pays tribute to a brave brush maker.

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