

## SWIMMING POOLS

# Pools of tears

**Dan Borden** takes a dive into the history and (doomed?) future of three beloved public swimming spots.

**W**hile Berlin's tourist hordes embrace it as the capital of "too much" – music, sex, fun, etc. – the government's accountants wail about "too many": two zoos, three operas, zillions of public museums, etc. The post-Wall merger of Berlin's two halves created a decadent excess of urban amenities that's draining the city's coffers.

The big losers in the too-many game have been the city's public pools. The bean counters claim that, with over 50 *Schwimmbäder* around the city, we're practically drowning in them. Never mind that the annual budget for each of the city's operas, about €50 million, could keep all of Berlin's baths and beaches afloat, or that those pools get seven million visits per year. The city has handed several historic pools to new owners for "creative re-use" – with very mixed results.

## Sham rebel

When developer Arne Piepgras bought Stadtbad Wedding, it was already an icon of Cold War-West Berlin cool. It had even starred in the 1956 juvenile delinquent film *Die Halbstarken*. But beneath its 1950s tile, the Stadtbad was a temple of the 19th-century crusade to bring hygiene to the (literally) unwashed masses. Nearby tenements lacked indoor plumbing when it opened in 1907, and public baths were considered key to stamping out diseases. Rebuilt after World War II bombing, Stadtbad Wedding served its well-scrubbed neighbours until it shut down in 1999.

In 2009, Piepgras reopened the Stadtbad as a "cultural incubator", under the name Stadtbad. Empty pools became stages and dance floors; changing rooms served as studios for prominent creatives like the mu-

After years of renovations, the pool in Oderberger Straße is set to open to the public at the beginning of October. The site offers free tours every Tuesday at 5pm.

sician Peaches. The venue hosted hugely successful techno nights (as well as *Exberliner's* 2009 Save Berlin event) for six years... until inspectors closed the party down. Stadtbad, they claimed, was a firetrap. One narrative casts those inspectors as the villains, but Wedding locals had long questioned owner Piepgras' motives. Citing other buildings he'd bought and sold, they saw a pattern: exploiting local artists to give his properties buzz, then flipping the now-cool properties at a giant profit. Was Piepgras incubating culture or breeding gentrification? His refusal to install a few fire alarms to reopen Stadtbad suggests those artists had unwittingly done their job, and he's now biding his time as property values soar.

## Joy killer

In 2003, the Berlin Senate gave Leipzig-based investor Rainer Löhnitz the keys to Friedrichshain's Sport und Erholungszentrum (sport and recreation centre), or SEZ. This East Berlin landmark consisted of seven pools surrounded by 50,000sqm of giddy joy: ice skating and bowling, ping pong and chess, plus 10 exotic eateries. The candy-coloured SEZ was part of a 1980s campaign by Communist leaders to win East Berliners' hearts and minds. It almost worked. In its Cold War heyday, 15,000 fun-seekers packed the SEZ, but post-Wall, the complex sank into decay.

Löhnitz paid only one euro for the SEZ on the condition he restore it to its former glory. Instead of construction workers, the cash-strapped developer called in an army of lawyers. For 13 years, he's battled the city to tear down the GDR landmark and replace it with luxury flats. The city countered, saying Löhnitz could build affordable housing. He refused. In January, Berlin's Senate sued to take the property back, but the greedy developer – and his lawyers – refuse to back down.

## School of heart

Like Stadtbad Wedding, Prenzlauer Berg's Stadtbad Oderberger Straße was designed by Ludwig Hoffman, but this 1902 architectural gem survived World War II intact. When clumsy 1980s additions caused catastrophic damage, devoted East Berliners built barricades to prevent its demolition. Berlin's Senate refused to renovate and put the baths up for sale – but this time, they found the right buyer. The neighbouring German Language School (GLS) was booming and wanted to expand. They'd already converted an 1876 school building into apartments and coveted the former swimming pool as the crown-jewel in their now-16,000sqm campus. After a €12 million renovation, the Stadtbad building reopened in January 2016 as the 70-room Hotel Oderberger, for both GLS students and the rest of us. And in October, Berlin swimmers will shed tears of joy as the Roman-style pool reopens for the first time in 30 years. ■

