

Thank you, Marlene Dietrich

If it weren't for the German actress, this iconic Berlin apartment may never have existed. Now, it's a designer pad in one of the city's best spots. Helen Pidd pays a visit. Pictures: Michael Danner





Architect Gisbert Pöpler had free rein to update this Bauhaus treasure as he wished, painting each room in electrifying colours: a red kitchen (left), and blue-and-yellow bedroom (above)

Some big names were involved in making Peter Schlesselmann's one-bedroom flat in Tiergarten, Berlin's most famous park. Walter Gropius, the granddaddy of Bauhaus, designed it. And five years ago, Gisbert Pöppler, one of Germany's most talented young architects, reconfigured it.

But if it weren't for Marlene Dietrich, it might never have been built at all. For more than a decade after the second world war, Berlin was in ruins and an ambitious plan was hatched: to rebuild the formerly grand Hansaviertel district, where the communist freedom fighter Rosa Luxemburg once lived, in über-modern style, and show off the results at the 1957 Interbau exhibition.

Around 50 top architects, Gropius and Le Corbusier among them, agreed to work on the Hansaviertel. The only problem was money. Then a bright spark on the Berlin senate suggested giving the city's most famous daughter a call. Dietrich, though long exiled in the US, had never lost her love for Berlin and, tickled by the idea of an avant-garde enclave slap bang in the middle of her home town, agreed to help. In just two days she had hustled a seven-figure sum out of her admirers on Wall Street and the project was a goer.

Originally the flats were owned by the state and rented very cheaply to young families. But by the time Schlesselmann, a writer and film producer, bought his in 2006, they were almost exclusively owner-occupied - a relative rarity in Germany, where renting is



Walter Gropius, the father of Bauhaus, designed the housing block (bottom) with funds raised by Marlene Dietrich. Today, it has been updated by owner Peter Schlesselmann (below, centre) with modern designer pieces such as the Blossom light (left) by New Zealand designer Jeremy Cole

Pöppler was determined not to design a pastiche of 1950s/60s style. "We didn't want just to put in a load of Arne Jacobsen furniture," he says. He wasn't daunted by the idea of tinkering around with a Gropius original? "Not one bit. It's actually a pretty banal building. It was supposed to be. And you shouldn't give the past too much merit." The Hansaviertel architects, in particular Gropius, believed in function over form, and had been given such limited budgets that anything fancy was out of the question.

The only structural change to the flat was knocking out an interior wall, which opened up the kitchen into the living room to let in more light. Pöppler describes the project as "absolutely low budget. Apart from the bespoke kitchen, which was not cheap, we mostly used basic materials. The tiles in the bathroom came from a builder's merchant." The whole lot came in at "under €40,000 (£34k)", he says - but that figure does not include some pretty classy furniture.

In the living room is a decadent purple chaise from Neue Wiener Werkstätte (nww.co.at), an Austrian design firm. A blue floor lamp is by UK design duo Edward Barber & Jay Osgerby (barberosgerby.com). The dining table is by Eero Saarinen, and above it hangs a wonderful porcelain "Blossom" lamp by New Zealand designer, Jeremy Cole (jeremycollection.net), which has such delicate china leaves that Schlesselmann was terrified of breaking it. "I am never moving house with that again," he says. Pöppler himself made the tall porcelain cupboard in the living room (pictured, top).

What really makes the flat unusual, though, apart from its heritage, is its location. Berlin is not blessed with many green spaces, so to live in its largest park is a treat indeed. It might even have suited Marlene herself ●

far more common than buying. By British standards, it is not expensive. Schlesselmann does not want to reveal the price he paid, but a slightly larger flat in the Le Corbusier towerblock nearby is on the market for €160,000 (£136k).

Once he had exchanged contracts, he called in Pöppler, a Berlin-based architect with a reputation for designing modern, luxury living spaces using bright colours. Although he couldn't alter the listed exterior, he was free to do as he liked with the interior, a series of low-ceilinged rooms with a great set of windows facing north, east and south. "Peter gave me free rein," Pöppler says. "And when we started work, he didn't turn up once to see how it was going. Usually clients want to pop in every day, but he left me to it. It was enormous fun."

Schlesselmann had already agreed to Pöppler's bold plans, which included painting the main rooms in strident colours: a red kitchen, green study and turquoise-and-yellow bedroom, echoing the colours of the Pierre Vago towerblock opposite. The floor is blood-red linoleum.