



Wall to wall

Architect Gisbert Pöppler's Berlin apartment is a shrine to the city's past - and a collection he's built up over 30 years.

By Philip Oltermann.

Photographs by Wolfgang Stahr



Whenever Gisbert Pöppler has people over for dinner, the ghosts of Berlin's past are guests of honour. Grouped around the dining table in his apartment in Berlin's central Mitte district are three velvet armchairs the interior architect salvaged from what he calls the "Honecker lounge" at East Germany's State Council Building, moulded over time by the well-nourished bottoms of Soviet apparatchiks. The table itself was formerly a conference table at Berlin's Evangelical Academy, and if you look under the table top you realise the short legs are propped up on some old-fashioned metal money boxes, like a piece of concept art. "I've always wondered why this table is so low," Pöppler says as he strolls through his apartment on sunny autumn morning. "One theory is that the Protestant church didn't want people in important meetings to be able to hide behind the furniture. Isn't that a beautiful idea?"

Pöppler, whose practice usually designs and builds living spaces for other people, lives in an apartment that not only speaks of his love for the ideas behind everyday objects, but also doubles as a museum of the German capital's tumultuous history.

Originally from outside Bremen, in the north of Germany, Pöppler arrived in Berlin in autumn 1989, when the city was still divided. At the time, living space was hard to find in the western half, and the young architecture student spent weeks roaming the streets, ringing doorbells to see if tenants would let him explore and admire their buildings. "As a student, it felt as if there was a point when I knew every house in Berlin."

Two months after his arrival, the Berlin Wall fell, opening up swathes of new territory to the architectural magpie's searching mind. In 1995, Pöppler found this 150 sq m apartment, in a tenement building from the 1890s, »



not far from the Checkpoint Charlie border-crossing. Partly derelict, the building had been earmarked to be torn down and replaced by a *Plattenbau* (concrete prefab) like the one on the opposite side of the road. There was no central heating, only a coal-burning oven that required constant attention – “a bit like looking after a dog”. But Pöppler and his partner took the plunge.

The interior of the average Berlin *altbau* (period) apartment is pared back: for years the prevailing fashion was to leave walls white and let the battered herringbone parquet or the period plastering on the ceiling serve as the sole adornment. “For ages, even sofas were considered too bourgeois,” Pöppler says.

Entering his second-floor apartment is an entirely different experience: the entrance hall’s walls wash over you in a warm Wedgwood blue, the ceiling glimmers with a hint of masking-tape yellow. A dusty pink table Pöppler picked up from a tailor in West Berlin greets the visitor coquettishly. In the living room to the left, there are explosions of colour: a Chinese export carpet from the 1920s, and a collection of abstract paintings by Hans Brosch, an East German painter who used a study trip to the Musée d’Orsay in Paris to escape to the west in 1979.

Raised in a family home in “shades of beige and black”, Pöppler has made use of colour his practice’s signature, though he insists there is no underlying theory behind his choices, just instinct. He’s not a fan of the trend for Farrow & Ball-style British paints, because they tend to be “quite foggy”, preferring instead French manufacturers, which he says pack more of a punch.

One characteristic feature of 19th-century tenement buildings in the city is the so-called Berliner Zimmer, an awkward, often dark room that connects the street-facing part of the apartment with the inner courtyard behind, once decried by Friedrich Engels as a “haven of darkness, stale air and Berlin philistinism”.

But in Pöppler’s apartment, the Prussian cobwebs are blown away by an almost baroque gusto for playful design ideas. In his Berliner Zimmer, the flat’s kitchen, a vintage cabinet he has “dragged around since I was 14” hangs next to an artwork made out of salad forks with deer-antler handles, assembled by his long-term American associate Remo Lotano.

In the adjacent bedroom, a central ceiling lamp is replaced by four coloured lights in each corner of the room. A stuffed jay peers down from its perch above the doorway.

Stories from Berlin’s past reveal

Previous pages, clockwise from left: the living room, with matching bookshelves and armchair designed by owner Gisbert Pöppler; a kitchen cabinet that Pöppler has “dragged around since I was 14”; the living room, with his Ambassador chaise. This page, from top: the hallway, with a pink cabinet found in a tailor’s shop; the kitchen, with cupboard doors salvaged from former department store Selbach



themselves only as you enter a room for a second or third time: there is the garden table on the courtyard terrace that Pöppler found on the street in Prenzlauer Berg, bent out of shape by the weather and riddled with worm holes. There is the sputnik ceiling light salvaged from the foyer of an East Berlin sports hall. Or there are the shelves he got from a bookshop that was subsidised by the East German regime and closed down after the fall of the Wall, which are built to hold only slim paperbacks of Marxist theory.

In recent years, however, Pöppler and Lotano have spent less time roaming junk shops and closing-down sales, and more time designing and manufacturing their own pieces of furniture. In the apartment’s brightest spot, in front of the window that looks out on to the street, pride of place belongs to a elegant chaise longue with feet of curling steel, and a porcelain cupboard that looks as if it is made of, rather than made to store, fine china.

“I wouldn’t want to say vintage is over,” Lotano says. “But there’s also a type of vintage that blinds you to the idea behind the furniture.” The ghosts of the past are still there, they just need to be kept on their toes ■