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Berlin re-united

Not quite grown up

Nov 5th 2009 | BERLIN

From *The Economist* print edition

Still sparsely peopled, and still an island

UNTIL the Berlin Wall fell, Jutta Wrase photographed mostly in black and white. You could buy colour film in East Berlin, but the colours were bad and few shops would develop it. After the wall fell Ms Wrase was too shocked for a while to photograph much. Not that she mourned the old regime: she had photocopied forbidden books for her friends and was once detained by the Stasi, East Germany's secret police. But on November 9th 1989, when a bungled East German government announcement sent a surge of people westwards, swamping the checkpoints in the wall, "something emotional fell away". Kodak could not make up for that, at least not at first.

Twenty years after Germans crowded disbelievingly through the wall, it is a fading scar in the capital of a united Germany. But Berlin has not attained urban adulthood. It abounds in things a great city needs, such as opera houses and underground transport, but still wants for others, notably people and jobs. It has a population of 3.4m but could easily take a million more. Where other city centres bustle, in Berlin's you can often hear your own footfalls.

This is part of its appeal. Low rents draw struggling artists. Tourism thrives in part, one senses, because Berlin's historical ghosts do not compete with the commercial clamour of a metropolis. The fall of the wall, followed swiftly by German unification, ended the city's isolation but not its island feel. Berliners rarely notice that they live 90km (56 miles) from the Polish border. An express train heading west from Berlin Spandau does not stop until it reaches former West Germany.

Berlin, says Franziska Eichstädt-Bohlig, a Green member of its Senate, is really three cities: the old east, the old west and the new middle. The federal government's move to Berlin in 1999 brought democratic lightness rather than bureaucratic stodginess to the cityscape of the new centre. This is where official Berlin blends with self-consciously unofficial projects like Tacheles, a gallery in a ruin. Yuppies have formed breeding colonies in picturesque Prenzlauer Berg, displacing the original eastern occupants. Kreuzberg, just to the west of where the wall stood, is both an ethnic trouble spot and an edgy hedonists' heaven.

Berlin sees its future as converting brainpower and flair into jobs. "We have to think beyond culture and cafés," says Christian Wiesenhütter of the chamber of commerce. But outside the effervescent middle, says Ms Eichstädt-Bohlig, "the old

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western and eastern milieus continue". Unification's losers cluster in areas like Hellersdorf, a Legoland of pre-fab apartments where, in some pockets, the jobless rate approaches 40%.

In elections the east leans towards the ex-communist Left Party. The west favours Social Democrats (they govern Berlin together) or Christian Democrats. History, too, is read differently on either side of the border. Last year a referendum to keep open Tempelhof airport, which was used to thwart the Soviet blockade of West Berlin in 1948-49, failed largely because of eastern indifference.

Like many easterners, Ms Wrase resented the "political arrogance" with which West Germany took over the East. But these feelings are fading. "Now there's a symbiosis" between the city's halves, she thinks. Thanks to the obliterated wall, Ms Wrase now takes her camera as far afield as Italy and Portugal.

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