

East Side Gallery

Thought Provoking Suggestions for a “Living Monument to Joy”

as presented to the action group “East Side Gallery retten!”¹⁾ on January 16th, 2015
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I. Main Theme

East Side Gallery – A Monument to “Joy”

II. Basis for the main theme

The question of what the East Side Gallery ultimately represents can only be decided retrospectively by future historians. Nevertheless, after two years of substantial work, the “East Side Gallery retten!” (Save the East Side Gallery !) action group feels, that on the night of November 9th, 1989, “joy” was the predominant emotion when the Berlin Wall opened. Consequently, “joy” will represent the keynote of the East Side Gallery Monument:

Unlike the Berlin Wall Memorial in Bernauer Strasse, the East Side Gallery doesn’t bring to mind the horrors of the Cold War. Instead its interpretation should be as a monument to “joy” as a result of the peaceful fall of the Iron Curtain and the end of the Cold War.

When recalling the images of the night of November 9th, 1989, we first of all remember scenes of “joy”. We think of waiting, euphoric crowds and long queues of “Trabbi” cars with confused looking East German border guards in their midst. We think of complete strangers falling into each other's arms like sisters and brothers. We think of “Wallpeckers”, people chiselling bits out of the Wall and of others banging like mad on the roofs of the Trabbis. We think of sparkling wine bubbling from bottles, like fountains.

The action group feels that the East Side Gallery embodies the hopes and dreams, as well as the fears felt in the night of “joy” in response to the fall of the Berlin Wall — as interpreted by international artists in 1990, at the instigation of David Monty. A wall of concrete which once divided the world into East and West.

The Gallery thus became a symbol of a rare kind of “joy”, like a utopian vision, which the classic German poet Friedrich Schiller had described in his poem, “Ode to Joy”, for Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. The night of November 9th, 1989 was the night when the tender beat of a wing of Elysium's daughter, that “joy” described by Schiller, was perceptible in this world for a blink of an eye: the night when women and men became as sisters and brothers.

As a consequence of the events of that night, the East Side Gallery has become a symbol of hope for the peaceful fall of other “walls” which still divide people around the world; the “wall” in Gaza, the “wall” separating the North and South of Korea, the “wall” between the United States of America and Mexico, the outer border of the EU. Perhaps the East Side Gallery, as a living memorial, will become a symbol for surmounting the barriers within our own minds.

One thing is certain; the East Side Gallery embodies the intense, deeply felt longing in every human being—the desire of mankind for freedom.

1 “Save the East Side Gallery!”

III. Communicating the main theme

The space behind the East Side Gallery, its west-facing side, could perhaps be made accessible to everyone. Part of this area could be made available to artists and performers giving them the opportunity to express the “joy” experienced on the night the Berlin Wall fell in a lively, authentic and multifaceted way.

Just like art, the inherent freedom of Schiller's “joy” is like a delicate, flickering flame which must be fanned and protected and continuously nourished by our thoughts and deeds. As a “living memorial”, an East Side Gallery filled with “joy” would act as a constant reminder of what we aspire to.

Some preliminary thoughts on how the main theme could be integrated into a “living memorial”:

1. Schiller's rare kind of “joy”

- **Street Art**
As the East Side Gallery has been initiated as a Street Art project, it seems especially appropriate to open up part of the site to Street Art by putting up walls on the former “death strip” or at part of the site's western section. This would also provide an option for street artists to express themselves in a space of free artistic activity.
- **Forum, small amphitheatre, Rostra**
The provision of suitable open air sites, would allow theatre plays, lectures and concerts to be staged.
- Recovery of one or more **open spaces for culture** in accordance with the monument's main theme (such as the YAAM club).
- The creation of a **park** for people to rest, linger and reflect.
- The **integration of existing local infrastructure** (such as the Radialsystem culture centre) for larger congresses, concerts, theatre plays, symposiums and similar activities in an authentic environment and close to the main theme.

2.2. Schiller's joy inherent “freedom”

- **Speaker's Corner**
(as a symbol of freedom inspired by London's Hyde Park)
- Artistic, creative “**Wagenburg**” (**wagon community**), a play area for children and young adults to pay homage to the open spaces which were typical of Berlin in the early 90s.
- **Flame of Freedom** (as a living symbol of freedom)

3.3. Historical background

- **Information access points**
to inform and educate visitors about the historical location and its background.
- **Guided Tours, workshops etc.**
(for example, on basic rights, human rights and the right to freedom)
- Last but not least: **Structural protection** of the East Side Gallery
(especially of the last remaining mural from 1990)

IV. Acceptance of the monument

As an authentic monument to freedom, a “living monument“, East Side Gallery would integrate well with the traditional structures of the Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg district, with its dissidents, visual and creative artists, as well as with Berlin as a whole, and encourage a positive resonance worldwide.

- According to a study of the German National Tourist Board (GNTB) from 2014, the East Side Gallery and the Berlin Wall are already No. 5 on the list of Germany's most popular tourist attractions ²⁾.
- In addition, a representative poll of the FORSA ³⁾ Institute (03/2013) revealed that the overwhelming majority of Berlin's inhabitants identify with the East Side Gallery - for example, 75 % of those questioned spoke out against the construction of apartment buildings on the Spree riverbank if it meant that parts of the gallery would have to be demolished as a result ⁴⁾.

V. Potential for the monument

- The East Side gallery holds the potential to become a UNESCO World Heritage Site. According to Prof. Dr. Leo Schmidt, conservationist and expert for the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), and chair of the department of Architectural Conservation at the Brandenburg University of Technology (BTU) Cottbus-Senftenberg, the East Side Gallery has a good chance of becoming part of the UNESCO World Heritage as a political memorial ⁵⁾.
- At the same time, the East Side Gallery would be appropriate as an unequivocal monument to reunification

VI. Ambassadors for the monument

Because of their engagement in issues of freedom, international understanding and the overcoming of walls, we will endeavour to win over personalities such as **Daniel Barenboim** and **Roger Waters** as “ambassadors“ for the project of a “living monument“ East Side Gallery.

VII. Current heritage status

At the moment, the East Side Gallery is registered as a monument in the “Berlin Memorial List“ of the local Senate Department for Urban Development and Environment under number 09040271. The official explanation states, among other things, that the East Side Gallery is the longest remaining section of the Berlin Wall still in its original condition and stands for “freedom and creativity being ultimately stronger than repressive measures and violence“.

VIII. Conclusion

The current official status of the East Side Gallery as a monument is insufficient, considering its symbolic power and its relevance for the district of Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg, the city of Berlin and the world as a whole. For this reason we propose that the East Side Gallery be declared a “living monument“. We wish to emphasise that this paper is intended as a basis for discussion, a starting point, food for thought, not a final concept. Ideas and suggestions are sought which will lead to the realisation of a fitting concept. A concept which will pay tribute to the “joy“ of the night when the Wall fell, and encapsulates not only all of its hopes and dreams, but also its fears. A concept which will return the “joie de vivre“ (Schiller's joy) of the early post-communist days to the East Side Gallery and will encourage future generations to commit themselves to freedom and the “joy“ resulting from it.

2 German National Tourist Board (GNTB), <http://www.germany.travel/en/towns-cities-culture/top-100/germany-travel-attractions.html> (update: July 2014)

3 Gesellschaft für Sozialforschung und statistische Analysen mbH

4 <http://www.bild.de/regional/berlin/umfrage-mehrheit-in-berlin-gegen-wohnungsbau-29651564.bild.html>

5 <http://www.berliner-zeitung.de/east-side-gallery/east-side-gallery-experte--mauer-istweltkulturerbe,21998376,22255482.htm>