

OVERSEAS

Buy your own piece of Stasi HQ history

In east Berlin, the Stasi's former telecoms nerve centre is being converted into flats, with prices starting at £347,000. Get in line now

[THE SUNDAY TIMES](#)

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Gotlindstrasse 91A didn't officially exist on the Land Registry

Christopher Goodwin

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When architects looked for the structural plans for the vast building on Gotlindestrasse, in east Berlin, they could find nothing in the archives of the Land Registry, where all buildings have to be logged. Officially, the long-abandoned six-storey concrete and steel structure – which they wanted to transform into designer lofts – didn't exist.

Yet there it was in all its crumbling, brutalist glory, a disturbing, eerie but fascinating architectural testament to an era most Germans would prefer to forget: communist East Germany, the Cold War and the ruthless, all-encompassing reach of the Stasi, or secret police, whose reign of terror only came to an end with the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989.



The long-abandoned six-storey concrete and steel structure will be turned into 50 loft style apartments

The architects at least knew that Gotlindestrasse 91A was part of a vast complex of 41 former Stasi buildings in the suburb of Lichtenberg, even if its specific function seemed to have been lost in the fog of collective forgetting.

The building's inner core — and almost all evidence of whatever its purpose may have been — had been ripped out years earlier, leaving just the concrete flooring and the enormous spanning struts that ran from basement to roof and across the length of the 22,000 sq ft footprint.

“So we applied to the Stasi archives,” recalls Patrick Stromeyer, an architect with Ulrich Borgert Braun & Schlockermann, the Berlin firm in charge of the development, which will see 50 loft-style apartments completed by the end of 2021. “And, lo and behold, stuff started turning up. Among other things, we discovered that there were these huge underground chambers and massive telephone trunk lines running in and out of the building.”





The plans revealed that Gotlindestrasse 91A had been built in 1977 as the internal telecommunications hub for the Stasi, the nerve centre for the secret police organisation's Abteilung N – Department N, with the N standing for *Nachrichten* (information). All the Stasi's internal communication systems, including the secure telephone lines that connected them to their masters in the Soviet Union, were funnelled through the building.

“It's a reinforced concrete and beam construction, and it was built like a bunker,” Stromeyer says. “If it took a direct hit, the infrastructure would be kept upright for as long as possible.”



Outside walls will have floor-to-ceiling windows and wide terraces that, on the upper floors, will offer views across Berlin

The Stasi, aka the Staatssicherheitsdienst, East Germany's Ministry for State Security, was described by The New York Times as "perhaps the most sophisticated and far-reaching espionage organisation ever created". For 32 years, until just after the fall of the Wall, it was run by the notorious Erich Mielke, known as the "master of fear". His office was in the main Stasi complex, about half a mile south of Gotlindestrasse, connected to it by a secure path protected by armed guards with dogs. The office has been preserved exactly as he left it in 1989.



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At its peak, the Stasi had 90,000 agents, one for every 180 of the country's 16m inhabitants. About 200,000 East Germans — more than 1% of the population — actively collaborated with the ministry, and it compiled dossiers on one in three of its citizens, or more than 5m people, delving into every aspect of their lives, from their sexual predilections to their eating habits. Children informed on their parents, lovers on each other.

The developers of 2052 Industrielofts are aware that even if the building was never used as a prison, or for the interrogation or torture of victims of the regime, the negative connotations of living somewhere that was built for the Stasi might put off some potential buyers.

“We are not going to push the Stasi aspect to the German market,” admits Andreas Ebel, chief operating officer of Bewocon, the property agency that is selling the lofts. Yet he believes that foreigners, who represent an increasingly significant proportion of buyers in Berlin's red-hot property market, will be fascinated by the history.





Original ceiling heights, ranging from 15ft to 19ft, will be retained, with prices starting at €389,900 (£345,000) for a 1,022 sq ft two-bedroom flat on the lower floors

He's surely right, given the continuing obsession the British and others have with spies — as seen in *The Little Drummer Girl*, adapted from the novel by John le Carré and now showing on BBC1 — and depictions of the Cold War in TV series such as *Deutschland 83*, which featured a Stasi agent and was screened on Channel 4, the forthcoming sequel series, *Deutschland 86*, and the critically acclaimed 2006 film about the Stasi, *The Lives of Others*.



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Indeed, the building's original function will be highlighted in the design, with the vast central area, used to house the mass of telephone cables, wires and switches, set to be transformed into a six-storey atrium, and the apartments running round the outside of the square structure.

“It’s an industrial building, a technical building,” Stromeyer says, “and the materials we will use will stay true to that – honest, basic concrete walls, glass block, screed flooring. We will emphasise the quality through the detailing and the use of good materials.”



Cold War Germany on television in Deutschland 83
CONNY KLEIN

Yet the residents won't feel as if they're living in a bunker. The outside walls of the loft-style apartments will have floor-to-ceiling windows and wide terraces that, on the upper floors, will offer views across Berlin. The original ceiling heights, ranging from 15ft to 19ft, will be retained to provide what should be light and airy interiors. The top two storeys will be turned into 10 duplex apartments. There will be underground parking for 24 cars, with another 26 covered spaces in the forecourt.

Prices will start at €389,900 (£345,000) for a 1,022 sq ft two-bedroom flat on the lower floors, rising to €1.8m for a 2,300 sq ft six-room duplex at the top. Construction will begin next spring, with the completion date set for the end of 2021.

Because the district of Lichtenberg is just outside the circular S-Bahn train ring that defines central Berlin, these prices are considerably lower than in trendier inner districts such as Mitte, Friedrichshain and Prenzlauer Berg. And, although property in Berlin is still a lot cheaper than in comparable European capital cities such as Paris and London, values there are rising much faster, currently 15%-18% a year.

“In the past 10 years, Berlin has become a popular city,” Ebel says. “Fifty thousand people a year are moving here and the city is not building enough apartments for them. Other European cities have slowed down in terms of increases in real-estate prices, but Berlin still has a large gap to close.”



That gap could be narrowed a little further by property buyers with a fascination for Germany's Cold War past. Even le Carré's best-known spy, George Smiley, might find himself smiling wryly if he were to ponder how this architectural symbol of the communist Stasi has now been co-opted into capitalism.

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