

Breathing
new life
into Leipzig
The Lungs
installation
(2013) by Artúr
van Balen at
Kaufhaus Held



www.dominikkrauss.de

SO HOW DID LEIPZIG BECOME HYPEZIG?

It was once an industrial stronghold but suddenly everyone wants a piece of East Germany's hip second city. Its DIY arts and social scenes are cooler than Berlin's, but can it retain its rough-edged authenticity, asks **Feergus O'Sullivan**

Could it be time to say goodbye to Berlin? The hipness of Germany's biggest city has been big news for decades now, but in the past few years its reputation as the European capital of cool seems to be, er, cooling. Those warehouse clubs it used to be famous for? They're being hassled for noise pollution and sometimes even closed down. Its underground galleries? They're going overground. With the German political elite now settled in and property prices spiking, the city's squatting era is also basically over. As for once dirt-cheap rents, don't even ask a Berliner about where rents have gone if you don't want an earful of angst. The city may still kick, but its status as the undying capital of thrifty cool is taking a knock. So where next?

The answer might be Leipzig. Eastern Germany's second city (just ahead of Dresden) of roughly half a million people is currently stealing its northern neighbour's reputation as the go-to city both for artists and young people more interested in quality of life than career. Granted, the place is being hyped – so much so that the German media has nicknamed it Hypezig. Still, there are definitely game-changing shifts going on in the city, opening it up for ➔

creative types fleeing Berlin's higher prices, and for the inevitable, dreaded wave of property developers that are coming in their wake.

Much of Leipzig does actually look a bit like Berlin 25 years ago. Beyond a dense, pretty centre made almost chocolate box-like by restoration, the city is still ringed with seemingly endless streets of unused warehouses and elegantly wasted tenements. Its once opulent houses, clad with neoclassical cornices and swirling Art Nouveau window frames, are being tidied up but here and there, the odd bit of naked brickwork still pokes through worn-down stucco facades. Right now, these cobbled streets are quiet (just like Berlin used to be), but the buildings show the city's onetime wealth and offer myriad possibilities to a certain type of grassroots culture worker.

'In the city it's really overwhelming what you can do because of the architecture here,' says designer Dominik Krauss of the city's nascent social scene, who first came here from Stuttgart three years ago. 'Here the old, unused buildings scream: "Do something with me!" Every time you go out to a party or an exhibition, it's in a different space. It's never-ending because the city is moving so fast.'

Krauss has helped to build up this scene himself – he is one of several masterminds behind Kaufhaus Held, a club, performance and exhibition space filling five floors of an old department store west of Leipzig's city centre. With a freedom impossible in most cities, Kaufhaus Held has staged techno parties on the roof, concerts in the basement and exhibitions on the first floor, as well as creating artists' studios. Other similar art spaces and bars are mushrooming in formerly run-down West Leipzig, occupying old power stations or squatting in vacant shops.

You might not realise this, however, looking at the area's often empty roads. 'Sometimes you get this feeling in West Leipzig that there's nobody around. But then you can cycle through empty streets and then come across 200 bikes outside an old factory. Inside, there's a party going on.'

I'm going to need a bigger canvas

Artist MadC paints a 550sq m wall alone in a week at the Alte Messe (2013). The mural is one of the largest ever completed by an artist in such a short space of time; the Spinnerei, the epicentre for Leipzig (below)

Typically for a city on the make, Leipzig's current reinvention is built on years of hardship and atrophy. Once an industrial stronghold, Leipzig's industries were decimated after Germany's reunification of 1991. With jobs gone, Leipzig started to bleed residents. It lost over 100,000 people during 1988-1998 as former factories were left to moulder. It was by reusing these factories that Leipzig's cultural revival began.

At this revival's core was the Leipziger Baumwollspinnerei (or Spinnerei), once continental Europe's largest cotton mill. When this towering expanse of redbrick factories, chimneys and iron walkways stopped spinning yarn in the early 1990s, artists soon realised that its huge, light filled lofts were ideal, cheap spaces to work in. Gradually, local creative types reconvered the place, squirrelling away in relative obscurity in an interesting but slightly provincial city that was down on its luck.

Then something unexpected happened. The art world cottoned on to the fact that fascinating work was coming out of the

Spinnerei, and from Leipzig in general. While conceptual and installation art reigned elsewhere, Leipzig's fine but conservative art academy had spawned a generation of graduates still versed in the exact, representational painting techniques associated with socialist realism.

A group of Leipzig painters experimented with adapting the socialist realist style to create works of crisp, monumental surrealism. The art world at large started buying and Leipzig suddenly was 'hot'.

A decade or so on, the Spinnerei is ➔

GET A ROOM

The glass-fronted [Mercure Hotel](#) is city-slick on the outside, but family friendly indoors. Tuck into an international menu at Art Nouveau restaurant LaLique either inside or on the terrace. *British Airways offers three nights from £259*pp including flights.*

Found in the heart of Leipzig, the [Novotel](#) is not only in the ideal location for exploring the city, but overlooks the picturesque swan pond and park opposite. The hotel bar, Le Grand Café de la Gare, has a lively evening atmosphere while the pretty restaurant, Le Jardin, serves regional specialities and international dishes. *British Airways offers three nights from £269*pp.*

With four restaurants and two bars to choose from, [The Westin](#) is truly the place for delicious indulgence. Towering at 27 stories high, the hotel's rooms and restaurants all offer spectacular views over the city, while the pool and spa offer a chance to escape from it. *British Airways offers three nights from £469*pp.*

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'IF THERE ARE 200 BIKES BY AN OLD FACTORY, THERE'S A PARTY INSIDE'





'D NEVER BE ABLE TO AFFORD A STUDIO THIS BIG IN NYC'

firmly on the international art map, but its collection of galleries, studios, shops and cafés hasn't lost its rough-edged authenticity. Certainly, it houses top commercial galleries such as EIGEN + ART and Halle 14, but its lofts remain full of international artists, some of whom live here on residencies.

One of these is New Yorker Angela Miskis, who finds Leipzig's art scene liberating: 'For me, it's about space. I'd never be able to afford a studio this big in New York, and there's so much quiet, while I have access to international artists all the time. I've learnt about how things work in Sweden, Finland, Russia, Australia, whereas in New York it's the NYC arts scene and nothing but.'

The Leipzig art scene may be well established, but its social scene still has an improvised feel. Don't come here expecting the chic bars and fancy restaurants that have swept Berlin recently. Certainly there are exceptions, such as grand Art Deco-styled curators' favourite Café Telegraph. More typical, however, is the DIY approach of places like West Leipzig bar-cum-bike workshop Dr Seltsam, where drinkers down bottled beer among walls hung with wheels and hacksaws. Many Leipzig bars look like they've been cobbled together like this, basically because they have. Many locals want to keep this make-do-and-mend attitude just the way it is. As Jasmin, a

photography student I meet at Dr Seltsam, says, 'Now Leipzig is still calm and relaxed. We like it, and can afford it, just how it is.'

That change may be coming pretty fast nonetheless. The city's economy is reviving, and beyond that the floating world of art, there are more real jobs for the majority of locals. Leipzig's population is returning to pre-reunification levels and manufacturers are moving back to the area.

The future of the Leipzig art spaces and cafés that are attracting media attention, meanwhile, is precarious. While some have bought, many are 'between-users', who rent run-down property cheaply and renovate it in return. These spaces are later re-let at far higher rates. There's a fatalistic awareness of this process among Leipzig's current scene. You don't give a gallery a name like Impermanent Cultural Centre, a space in East Leipzig, because you expect it to be around forever. As Dominik Krauss says of Kaufhaus Held: 'There is a mechanism going on where we help to put up property values. If someone's in the house, it's better and protects against crime, and our activities add value to it. Still, it wasn't like this when I first came here. Now everybody is investing in property.'

Certainly, a skyline filled with cranes suggests things are changing. In ten years time, Leipzig may be a different place indeed. It could be flooded with chic bars that have been 'distressed' deliberately and restaurants where they tell you the name of the cow your steak came from. By then, however, much of the arty crowd now making a name in the city could well be

HAUTE CULTURE

Leipzig has been punching above its weight culturally for centuries. Home to one of Europe's most important commercial fairs since the Middle Ages, the city's sophistication saw it called Little Paris in the 18th century, a role that only grew when railway building made it a key hub for central Europe. Once home of Bach, Wagner and Mahler, Leipzig has produced some of the most beautiful music in history – today its Gewandhaus orchestra is the world's largest professional classical ensemble.

FOOD & DRINK

Many of Leipzig's new breed of bars and cafés have a DIY feel, whether its bar and bike workshop Dr Seltsam (+49 1578 758 3441) or former sewing machine shop Nu R (Mariannenstraße 89), a vegan-friendly café and bookshop. Or try Central Leipzig's Café Telegraph (+49 341 149 4990), an elegant Art Deco-styled grand café/restaurant serving classic Viennese to an older arty set. Alternatively, drop into West Leipzig's Fleischerei (+49 341 9625 7848), a café/bar housed in a stunningly converted Victorian

ART

For art galleries, head for the Spinnerei complex, the huge former cotton mill filled with artists' studios and major art spaces such as EIGEN + ART, as well as some workshop boutiques. Other spaces include contemporary showcase Galerie für zeitgenössische Kunst (Karl-Tauchnitz-Straße 9-11) and the warehouse and courtyard of Galerie KUB (Kantstrasse, 18).



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Cottoned on
Once Europe's largest mill, the Spinnerei is now firmly on the international map; Jörg Herold's installation at Galerie EIGEN + ART (top)

*Based on World Traveller. Excludes reward flights. **Taxes, fees and surcharges also apply. Photographs: Jörg Herold/Dr. Dokumentarchäologie auf der Suche nach dem Himmelreich der Schlesier Installation view 2014; Galerie EIGEN + ART Leipzig courtesy Galerie EIGEN + ART Leipzig/Photo: Josephine Wälter. Contrasto/eyevine