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DEATH SENTENCES IN THE LIVING ROOM

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From Nazi Court to Posh Apartments

By Kristina Simons

Hitler's military courts were notorious for their liberal use of the death penalty. Now, a courthouse in Berlin where Nazi judges sentenced hundreds of Third Reich dissidents to die has been converted to an apartment building. Not everyone is happy about the switch.

The view from the loft apartments in the newly renovated apartment building is as idyllic as it gets in Berlin: a lovely lake with ducks and swans paddling about, all surrounded by vibrant green parkland. It's the kind of place one doesn't often find just minutes from the heart of a large city. No wonder interest in the building -- called "Atrion" -- has been high.

PHOTO GALLERY: MODERN LIVING IN A NAZI COURTROOM



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But interest hasn't just been limited to potential tenants. Historians too have taken note of the new residential paradise. The building, after all, hasn't always been known as the "Atrion." From 1936 to the middle of World War II, it housed one of Nazi Germany's notorious military courts. From their bench in the building, Nazi judges sentenced over 1,400 conscientious objectors and resistance fighters to die, including members of the well-known resistance group from the "Rote Kapelle" or Red Orchestra.

"This project shows an incomprehensible forgetfulness on the part of both Berlin and the country when it comes to the past," says Manfred Krause, president of the Forum Justizgeschichte, a group specializing in the misdeeds of Nazi courts.

Reign of Judicial Terror

The former courthouse has been divided up into 106 rentals, the most expensive of which spreading out over 207 square meters (2,228 square feet), complete with all the old relief work, ornamented windows, plasterwork and vaulted ceilings. Many of the community rooms on the ground floor have been lovingly brought back to life as well.

Of most concern, however, is the courtroom itself. It is here where Nazi judges imposed a reign of judicial terror on all those seen as opposing Hitler's megalomaniacal plans. It is here where the court handed down dozens of death sentences against resistance fighters from the Rote Kapelle -- a group of Berlin university students who not only distributed anti-Nazi propaganda but also helped Jews escape the Nazi death machine. Johannes Tuchel, head of the German Resistance Memorial Center -- dedicated to documenting anti-Nazi resistance prior to and during World War II -- is unhappy about the current plan to transform the courtroom into a common

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room for use by the building's tenants.

"It is inconceivable that this place, in which so many death sentences were handed down, should be turned into a cozy space for relaxation," Tüchel says. Tüchel's group only learned about the building's planned conversion into apartments until it was too late to stop it.

Thomas Groth, director of property management firm allod Immobilien GmbH, which manages the building, has little patience for accusations that he is part of a history cover-up. He points to the fact that as many details as possible were kept true to the building's original appearance and the outer façade, in keeping with the structure's protected status, remains unchanged. "We wanted to keep as much as possible," Groth says.

Treason, Espionage and 'Undermining Military Morale'

He also points out that the former courtroom will be available for public use as well -- hosting organized debates on the role of justice in the Third Reich for example, or even for exhibitions. "We have treated this space with the utmost respect, which is why we made the conscious decision not to build apartments in it," Groth says. "The renovated courtroom will be faithful to the original -- the only things we have removed are the benches."

The building, with its neo-Baroque façade, was constructed between 1908 and 1910. And for most of its existence, it served the cause of justice -- first as a military court and then as an economic court before the Nazi military began passing down harsh sentences on soldiers accused of treason, espionage and "undermining military morale." Commemorative plaques on and inside the building itself serve as a reminder of the Third Reich period.

Once the war was over, the building was used to enforce the laws of the new Federal Republic of Germany. But in 1997, it fell into disuse and became a vast monument to history that few knew what to do with. "The government is letting the former Nazi Military Court building fall into ruin. Nazi history is being erased yet again," complained a Berlin group in 2003.

The problem, however, was not that the government wanted history to disappear. Rather, nobody quite knew what to do with the property. A plan to convert it into a luxury hotel fell through in 2004. Meanwhile, the Forum Justizgeschichte proved unable to rustle up the funds and support necessary to turn it into a memorial center for victims of Nazi courts. "We received polite and supportive responses from almost all of those contacted, who nevertheless declined to back us up," recalls Krause. Even the Berlin government admits that it was overwhelmed by both the building's historical significance and its high price. Then, in 2005 a private Dutch investment firm bought it from the federal government and began renovation work in April 2006.

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In other words, Groth likes to point out, turning the building into living spaces is a vast improvement over the last decade of dilapidation. "The building had naturally been affected by the length of time it lay empty," Groth explains. "The fact that it had to be kept constantly heated was costing taxpayers a fortune."

Serious Structural Damage


Berlin's state government agreed. The slow disintegration of the property was a critical factor for officials as they considered whether

to grant a permit to transform it into apartments. "Another decade standing empty would have caused serious structural damage to the building," the Berlin Senate responded to a query from a local politician.

Krause remains concerned about the lack of a centralized memorial center dedicated to the victims of Nazi justice, though an exhibition "In the Name of the German Volk -- Justice and National Socialism," housed in a different Berlin court, takes up some of the slack.

But Groth sees things more pragmatically. "For about 80 years, justice in its true sense was administered in this court. The building was only used as a Nazi courthouse for about seven years, a relatively short time." In any case, he continues, the tenants themselves -- 87 per cent of the apartments are already let -- have

no problems with the building's history. "Only one potential tenant backed out for that specific reason."

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