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# Conserving a boundary: The conservation and management of a Berlin Wall mural

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In 1991, five segments of the Berlin Wall, first painted by renowned contemporary artists Thierry Noir and Kiddy Citny, were bought at auction, transported to the USA, and placed in an outdoor environment that severely advanced the deterioration of the painted surface and reinforced concrete substrate. This paper discusses aspects of the conservation treatment and management plan for these painted segments of the Berlin Wall. The strategy and criteria for the conservation program were defined by a multidisciplinary team that comprised conservators, concrete specialists, and engineers; the deliberations of this team also led to an appropriate treatment and management plan. The choice to intervene at a minimal level meant treatment was restricted to stabilization rather than restoration or reconstruction of deteriorated areas. Additionally, the team decided to reinstall the pieces indoors to reduce future deterioration.

**Keywords:** Berlin Wall, Conservation, Graffiti, Reinforced concrete, Wall paintings, Contemporary art

## Introduction

In the early 1990s, five vibrantly painted sections of the Berlin Wall (designated as segments 92–96) were purchased at auction by a private collector, shipped to the USA, and installed in midtown Manhattan, New York, where they graced the small courtyard of a skyscraper on Madison Avenue (Fig. 1).

The segments were intentionally placed in a location accessible to the public and, with aesthetics in mind, positioned directly in front of an urban waterfall. Water fell directly on the foot, spraying the rear and creating a humid atmosphere around the base (Fig. 2). Wetting and drying cycles induced by the water feature, in conjunction with Manhattan's harsh outdoor environment, led to severe deterioration of the mural; this included cracking and delamination of the concrete support, corrosion of the internal rebar, and flaking and loss of the paint layers. In 2013, after a succession of large losses of the painted substrate occurred, the need for conservation treatment was recognized by the owner.

This paper discusses aspects of the conservation treatment and management plan in order to illustrate a number of key issues frequently encountered in the conservation of contemporary outdoor art. During the program to stabilize and preserve the five segments, the consulting team wrestled with issues such as how to reconcile spontaneous artistic creation with the public's demand for permanence. Another

concern was whether altering the presentation of the Wall to increase longevity would change its value or public perception. Finally, the discrepancies between the conservation ethos and treatment approaches that are applied to a work of fine art and a fragment of a built heritage structure that is now considered an artifact with exceptionally strong historical and cultural associations, had to be navigated.

## Background and significance

The Berlin Wall was the perilous<sup>1</sup> and imposing barrier dividing east and west post-war Berlin. The first incarnation of the wall was erected practically overnight on 13 August 1961. It physically sequestered families and friends, separated people from their livelihoods, and eliminated the population's freedom of movement and expression until the border was reopened in November 1989.

The five panels considered here are part of the 'fourth-generation' Berlin Wall construction, fabricated and erected between 1975 and 1980 (Feversham & Schmidt, 1999). This phase of the Wall was constructed with poured concrete, reinforced with industrial quantities of internal steel rebar, and capped with sections of sewage pipe spanning a minimum of three segments to increase strength. Each segment is around 3.6 m high and 1.2 m wide. Assembled rapidly and inexpensively, these panels were never intended to be an artist's 'canvas'. Instead this wall was constructed to intimidate

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<sup>1</sup>The numbers of deaths that occurred as a result of people attempting to cross the wall varies with source, with a range from 130 to 239 cited in the literature.



**Figure 1** An image of the segment installed in its original Manhattan location. The large red head and adjacent 'film strip' of monochrome heads was painted by Thierry Noir. Kiddy Citny painted the yellow head and small figure to its right. Image: © Cranmer Art Group, LLC, 2010.

and control the population of the city in which it was built. As a means to express public rejection of the structure, the side of the wall facing West Berlin became a place for artistic and political expression in the early 1980s, often depicting political discontent. In contrast, the side facing East Berlin was inaccessible and such expression was impossible.

Segments 92–96 were originally located along Waldemarstraße and were first painted using aerosol spray paint sometime between 1984 and 1986 (Anderhub, 1985; Kudas & Nungesser, 1990) by contemporary artists Thierry Noir and Kiddy Citny, who spearheaded the movement to cover the wall in art.<sup>2</sup> The artists' intent was to voice protest by making a large, colorful mark on a major symbol of the Cold War. The narrative behind the creation of these works is different from other unsanctioned murals on concrete substrates. Noir states that he wanted to 'transform it, make it ridiculous, and help destroy it' (StreetArtLondon, 2013). There are few precedents where a street artist wishes the structure on which he or she paints to be demolished. Not only is the artist

uninterested in permanence, but is painting with the hope that the works will be torn down.

Both paintings are characteristic of the artists' styles and subject matter, and as these works became iconic, the artists gained recognition. Over Noir and Citny's original paintings there are additional tags<sup>3</sup> and text-based graffiti by many others, applied using a vast range of aerosol paints, differing in material composition, quality, and brand. The cultural significance of these paintings lies both in their place in the history of contemporary street art and their association with the historically important Berlin Wall. They also have symbolic value, imparted by their role in the fight against oppression and political control. This significance and value is felt not only by those individuals who remember the wall when it still stood, but also by those who are directly or indirectly affected by similarly divisive walls that still stand. Although the structure has been removed from its original context, the power of the imagery is immediately apparent. For the conservation of Segments 92–96, these issues had implications that affected stabilization and presentation decisions. Each of the values was assessed during the decision-making process, as it was realized that privileging any one would impact authenticity and understanding.

<sup>2</sup>Thierry Noir is now recognized as the first artist to paint large-scale murals on the Berlin Wall (StreetArtLondon, 2013). Evidence for the date of the application of the paintings on the wall also comes from Wim Wender's 1987 film *Wings of Desire*.

<sup>3</sup>A tag is commonly defined as a graffiti writers' unique signature.





**Figure 2** The waterfall that wets the base of the wall, causing biological growth and fully saturating the concrete substrate. Corrosion of rebar and loss of substrate can be seen on the left side of the base. Image: © Kiernan Graves, 2013.

### Deterioration and damage

While many of the deterioration phenomena affecting Segments 92–96 are typical for this type and grade of reinforced concrete (Odgers, 2013; MacDonald, 2003), specific factors considerably escalated the mural's rate of deterioration and damage over time. While the climate of Manhattan is not entirely different to that of Berlin, it has more extreme diurnal fluctuations of relative humidity, higher temperatures in summer, and between two and three times greater annual precipitation.<sup>4</sup> However, the nearby waterfall that continuously saturated the base of the mural had far greater consequences.<sup>5</sup> Water penetrated into the substrate and migrated to its surface, causing internal oxidation of the steel rebar and activating cycles of salt crystallization. Additionally, the courtyard in which the mural was positioned, offered little shelter from the elements, and limited security. As a result, many areas of concrete were delaminating and in

imminent danger of loss. Water migration and associated salt activity, in combination with the fluctuating ambient environment, caused widespread tenting, lifting, flaking, and loss of the paint layers. Years of dirt, pollution, and other urban grime were accumulating on the surface of the painting. Finally, the public's unmediated interaction with the mural was resulting in vandalism and mechanical damage, particularly towards its base where tourists often sat to be photographed with the wall.

Ultimately, conservation treatment was instigated as a result of two events. First, in early 2013, a large loss occurred in the mural where an internal rebar had corroded and expanded so appreciably that a large piece of painted substrate detached (Fig. 3). This was the second such known incident, but in this case the detached piece was recovered. Second, on 9–10 August 2014, in a well-orchestrated act of vandalism, the words 'IT'S LIKE TALKIN TO A WALL' were spray painted through a stencil across the mural's surface in Arabic, English, and Hebrew (Fig. 4). Although this site offers greater security than most other outdoor murals, the mural's accessibility was one factor enabling the defacement and while this was the most significant incident of vandalism to date, it was not the first.

### Planning and management

In 2013, instigated by the loss of the fragment, the owner's collection manager assembled a multi-disciplinary team — comprising conservators, concrete specialists, structural engineers, building engineers, art handlers, an architect, and one of the original artists — to determine the most appropriate way forward. The team collaborated through a number of site visits, both separately and as a group, a handful of face-to-face meetings and extensive email communication. The artist's input was limited to specific questions, liaising exclusively with the collection manager, who would then pass his responses on to the team. The initial planning phase lasted over a year, which speaks of the complexity of the issues faced. By the fall of 2014, the team determined an appropriate treatment and management plan for the mural. The strategy and criteria for conservation were defined by understanding the mural's significance in both a historical and artistic context, in conjunction with its condition and possible remedial interventions.

When confronted with the rapidly deteriorating segments of the Berlin Wall, all parties involved agreed that the segments should be removed from the path of the waterfall. However, the remedial treatment procedure, subsequent reinstallation, and future maintenance regime required far greater deliberation to reach an appropriate consensus.

<sup>4</sup>Climatic data were compiled from data found at National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (noaa.org) and Royal Netherlands Meteorological Institute (eca.knmi.nl); averages were taken from data spanning 1981–2011 from weather stations in Manhattan, NY, USA and Berlin, Germany.

<sup>5</sup>Each year, the waterfall ran from early spring to late fall.



**Figure 3** A large fragment,  $\sim 75 \times 25$  cm ( $30 \times 10$  inches), that completely detached from the wall and was subsequently recovered by the guards manning the security station inside the adjacent building. Image: © Kiernan Graves, 2013.

### Remedial conservation treatment

Due to the nature of some of the treatments to be carried out, as well as legal and logistical issues associated with the Madison Avenue location,<sup>6</sup> the mural was moved to an off-site warehouse for the duration of remedial treatment. Conservators undertook treatment of the mural's painted surface, stabilizing the wall's original paint layers, securing areas of detached painted concrete and removing the recent graffiti. A light surface cleaning was also undertaken to remove the layer of accumulated dirt and pollution. Separately, the team of concrete specialists cleaned areas of unpainted concrete and removed corrosion from exposed metal surfaces.

The most debated aspect of remedial conservation related to aesthetic presentation following the completion of stabilization. The choices were discussed by the conservators, the architect heading the team of concrete specialists, and the collections manager. It was agreed that a full restoration was not appropriate. While the idea of restoring the mural to a point early in its lifespan was suggested, a conscious decision was made to present the piece at a point midway between its condition at auction and its state at the time of conservation. This approach was decided upon for a number of reasons. Preserving the mural's historical narrative, including the results of deterioration to the present day, was an important factor. The view was taken that the Berlin Wall is not only a work of art, but also a historical artifact that defines a moment and culture. It is this historic nature of the wall that attracts many of its visitors and its authenticity as such must be preserved. At the same time, however, the wall can be viewed as an object whose 'living' moment ended when it was removed from its original context. New and potentially preventable incidents of graffiti and mechanical damage were deemed

out of place with this idea and thus reversed as far as possible. Furthermore, defacement and damage tend to propagate further defacement and damage if allowed to endure; essentially, condoning vandalism by allowing it to remain was not seen as a viable option.

Deterioration that occurred since the mural's purchase was stabilized but not disguised, while detached fragments and incidences of vandalism that occurred after its arrival in Manhattan were restored where possible. This distinction was extremely challenging and was not taken lightly.

### Re-installation

Upon completion of remedial treatment, a plan for re-installation and future maintenance was necessary. The first priority in re-installation was to devise a solution that would mitigate the causes of deterioration and provide an environment that would have the least deleterious impact on the wall's future condition. The throngs of tourists who visit the mural on a daily basis were a secondary but substantial priority, and it was of great importance that the piece should remain accessible. Achieving both goals, in a manner sensitive to conservation ethics, artist intent, and the wall's significance, proved a challenging task.

A number of interventions were discussed that could alleviate the mural's deterioration while enabling it to return to the courtyard from which it was removed. However, all were deemed overly invasive and/or requiring significant future maintenance. Examples of these proposals put forward by various members of the committee were to remove and replace corroded metal, employ a system of cathodic protection, or add a non-permeable coating. All these concepts were conclusively rejected for their invasiveness, due to such issues as the high content of rebar and its location just below the painted surface, as well as the chronic failure of external surface coatings. Another argument against these interventions was the presence of other types of metal within the concrete substrate, including a shovel with a corroded blade — evidence of the physical history and construction of the wall. Removal of the rebar or other metal objects was not an option and connection between the heterogeneous metallic inclusions to ensure the functionality of cathodic protection would be extremely difficult. It was later discovered that in some places the rebar was wrapped with coeval newspaper, wonderful archeological material whose loss would have been regrettable.

An alternative considered was to enclose the Wall within a climate-controlled glass structure so that it would not have to be removed from its courtyard location. However, this approach limited access for monitoring and maintenance, was difficult to engineer,

<sup>6</sup>At this location only minimal treatments could be performed and even these were permitted only on Sundays or before 11 am.





Figure 4 Image of the wall in the courtyard showing the graffiti after the waterfall had been shut off. The area from which the fragment shown in Fig. 3 had detached is seen at the bottom right of the central panel. There are three vertical exposed rebars visible from within the loss. Image: © Tishman Speyer, 2014.



Figure 5 The wall installed in its new location in the lobby of the Madison Avenue office building. Image: © Ellen Davis, 2015.

would require complex equipment to control the internal environment, and would have impaired the art's visibility, tactility, and mystique.

In light of these unsatisfactory options, a clear argument was made to move the wall to a publically accessible interior space, particularly since its removal for

treatment had already been undertaken. This solution would successfully meet the two primary goals of the team: to control the causes of deterioration, thus increasing longevity, and to allow continued visitor access. It was also the least invasive approach. Yet, this maintenance plan did not come without its own serious concerns, both in terms of logistics and ethics. Firstly, a space that could accommodate the size and weight of the wall had to be found. This was no easy task for an object estimated to weigh between 11 000 and 13 000 kg.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, a less quantifiable discussion was sparked regarding how installation indoors might alter the perception and value of the wall and associated art, although it can be contended that its contextual significance had already been altered when it was removed from Berlin. Additionally, an observation made by one member of the group that resonated with the entire team was that an interior installation might serve to emphasize the magnitude and oppressiveness of the wall rather than presenting it as a photographic backdrop or destination.

### Conclusions

In order to limit the remedial treatment to a program that emphasized minimal intervention, the team decided to install the segments of the wall in the lobby of the building whose courtyard it had previously occupied (Fig. 5). The environment is controlled for human comfort throughout the year and therefore much more suitable for the segments. The main concern is the possibility of condensation occurring on the rebar during the summer months when air-conditioning is in use. During the summer of 2016, conditions will be monitored to understand if this is indeed a risk and, if so, determine how to moderate the environment to prevent condensation from activating further corrosion.

It remains to be seen if enclosure in an interior space — though imperative to the segments long-term survival — will negatively impact audience perception or if, alternately, the transfer to a stark lobby setting will allow the piece to loom large over visitors and display an aspect of its original intimidation factor.

When grappling with these issues, which have few precedents, the team took comfort in the fact that decisions were made after much deliberation and through thoughtful collaboration by a group whose expertise spanned multiple disciplines. Finally, the fact that the two primary objectives of the conservation program were achieved — to mitigate the causes of deterioration and enable free visitor access — is a worthy outcome.

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<sup>7</sup>Shipping records indicated that the five segments plus their 13 m (40 foot) container weighed 13 750 kg.