

## Design

# Decorators of the world, unite!

Eradicating relics of the former GDR in Berlin has become something of a national pastime since German unification. During the 1990s, indiscriminate decisions were made on the fate of important, often ugly, GDR buildings. Last month the final, controversial, word arrived on one of the most prominent structures of them all: the shimmering bronze Palast der Republik, the former GDR parliamentary chamber. Dating from the decade that taste forgot, the building is to be torn down. But a Berlin artist may have unwittingly helped it to live on – as a piece of retro wallpaper.

Stefanie Bürkle has reproduced a chunk of the 1976 exterior of the building on a square of wallpaper and persuaded high-profile Berliners to decorate their offices with it. From conductor Daniel Barenboim to Peter Conradi, president of the national architects' association, dignitaries have turned out to support the cause. Even the city's leftwing newspaper, *Tageszeitung*, joined in last week and democratically reprinted the wallpaper for its readers to take home.

The building itself is not instantly attractive. You have to look hard beyond the smashed panes, graffiti-stained corners and hot dog vans parked outside to appreciate its peculiar period charm. But the Berliner Tapete (Berlin Wallpaper), as it has been dubbed, uses the building's most attractive feature, its bronze mirrored panels, as the basis for a stylised pattern complete with the GDR national emblem.

The wallpaper's appeal is wide-ranging, believes Bürkle. Its 1970s orangey-brown squares wouldn't look out of place in any designer apartment. The political statement it makes is more attractive still. But most of all, its popularity lies in what Bürkle calls "the Goodbye Leninisation" of East Germany, whereby artefacts associated with the former



Retro chic... Peter Conradi enjoying GDR-inspired wallpaper

state, such as the giant TV Tower, acquire instant cool. East Berlin food brands and cartoon characters have long been the height of chic, and its communist buildings, particularly when endangered, fly the flag further.

This is what emblems of the GDR have been reduced to, says Bürkle. "For young people too young to remember East Germany, its symbols are being reduced to signs and patterns. I didn't intentionally try to add to this tradition – it was, after all, mostly ugly despotism."

The palace has long been empty of its contents. All that remains since it was closed to the public in 1990 and cleaned of its asbestos is its bronze shell. Of course, empty shells can be put to good use; just ask anyone who has visited Tate Modern. But it's unlikely that Berlin, in its seemingly unstoppable quest for trampling on its GDR past coupled with a huge lack of funding, would consider any similar plan just yet. *Hannah Booth*