

From Separation and Unity

[Hi]stories of a Border

This work deals with the history of the former inner German border, and some of its related stories. The border is here considered as a place which went through significant changes: starting as a line of demarcation (1945 - 1949), then becoming an unbreachable border (1949 - 1989), and finally ending as an unique and versatile landscape today — better known as the *Green Belt*.

After the Second World War, the separation of Germany into the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR or East Germany) required an 1.378 km long line of demarcation, running straight across the country.

The East German government successively closed down its external frontiers — under the pretext of wanting to protect the population from the alleged enemy, West Germany — and transformed it into a border fortification. Its real aim however, was to prevent deserters escaping from the republic, implying death bringing consequences for many. The government applied methods like buried ground mines, self-firing systems and armed soldiers, to name but a few, threatening and keeping the population under control. The implementation of this fortification required the relocation of thousands of residents and the disappropriation of hundreds of landowners, thus creating an artificial absence of human life along the border.

During four decades of German separation, benefiting from this artificially implemented absence of human life, countless number of threatened species had the chance to reinhabit along the border strip. This natural phenomenon did not stay undiscovered, and few weeks after the Berlin Wall fell, finally allowing the opening of the borders, more than four hundred environmentalists gathered in West Germany to debate about the worth protecting condition of this remarkable area — hour of birth of the project *Green Belt*.

Today more than 80% of the former border strip are protected by different levels of nature conservation. The so called patrol road, allowing the border troops to keep the border under control, still exists. Having become part of the European long distance hiking path, it grows increasingly popular within the context of the *Green Belt*. Since the border area still is sparsely populated, a shortage of overnight accommodations as well as catering facilities remains.

This work deals with the question of how to close these gaps, without ignoring the very specific history of the *Green Belt*, nor threatening its worth protecting natural diversity. Since the cultural memory in connection to the crimes of the inner German border exclusively focusses on the history of the Berlin Wall, this work pursues the aim of strengthening the cultural memory of the much longer part of the former border, the part that claimed the lives of more than three hundred people*.

The concept consists in building shelters along the *Green Belt*, one shelter for every year of existence of the GDR (1949 - 1989). Each of the forty shelters is to be located exactly where a story in the context of the border took place, in the exact

year it stands for. The shelters let the stories become visible and each shelter underlines its own specific story through its architectural characteristics, somehow telling it to its visitors. In this consequence, there is no corporate architectural language, the shelters only resemble each other through their program consisting in four places to sleep, a wet room and a common area including a fire place.

The three following designs show an exemplary presentation of three shelters, telling three different and very personal stories.

The first shelter tells the story of a 10 year old boy being shot by a border control while skating on a frozen lake. The shelter is swimming on the lake and thereby tracing the lines of the iceskating boy. It's architectural and constructional expression resembles the childlike and naive imagination of an archetypal house with its gabled roof as a main forming element.

The second shelter tells the story of three brothers that succeed to escape from the GDR. It is located on the river bank of Elbe River where the older brother escaped through swimming to the other bank of the boundary river. Its architectural form expresses the ambivalence of a guard tower: exposure and visibleness in a protective space.

The third story is told by a farewell letter from a former border official, writing this letter to his relatives right before being executed after having tried to escape from the GDR. The letter includes touching passages about the woods and the hunt and ends with Goethe's *Wanderer's Nightsong*. These contents can be recognised in the appearance of the third shelter.

* suicides and accidents included

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