

FRINGE BENEFITS



Colin Ward hears news from Rostock where people hanker for access to the media

In West Berlin, Mark and Siobhan, exploring the airwaves, found the best radio station was East Germany's phone-in DT64. And they learned that, before the Wall came down, this station was popular with West Germany's young: a reversal of the view that everyone in East Germany tuned in to the West's radio and TV. The continued existence of DT64 had been a harbinger of the regime's collapse: "The authorities just didn't know what to do. Everyone knew the party couldn't control them any longer." But by the time Siobhan and Mark got to the port of Rostock in East Germany, they saw graffiti in the streets saying "Save DT64", as the media there get closed down or incorporated in western commercial enterprise.

Founders of the access media group Despite TV, Mark and Siobhan—now working as Spectacle—are seeking a TV commission for *Zone*, a documentary on the experience of city life. Exploring the changing grain and texture of the urban environment, they ask the great question: whose city is it?

In Berlin last summer, Mark and Siobhan explored the Potsdamer-Platz, once a backwater by the Wall, and now the battleground of three multinationals with plans to redevelop it in their own image, not that of the Berliners. They were lured on to Rostock, the ancient Hanseatic city, which spreads around a horse-shoe-shaped bay with the mediaeval walled town in the middle, the shipyards, port and industry on one side, and on the other, the miles of identical housing blocks where the citizens live.

There they saw the first effects of West German colonisation and of the disdain West feels towards East. Because it was taken for granted that women worked in the shipyards, services like crèches or hairdressers once stayed open to suit their needs. The trams ran all night. Now West German business hours are imposed on East Germany. Degrees from the ancient university are not recognised in

West Germany. Siobhan and Mark also learned of the stifling control over communications that the communist regime had imposed. There were no private telephones except for top people. And no one outside the official system had access to video cameras. Siobhan and Mark and their colleagues were asked to come back and run a workshop on access media.

This they did before Christmas, and, like everyone else, were taken aback by the sheer pace of change. The fishing port had been closed, the shipyards shut down and the trading port's activities had been shifted to Hamburg. The property dealers had moved in and the yacht marina was expanding.

The people they met confirmed the irony of their experience. They had been taught Marxism for three hours a week throughout their school lives. As adults, they had toppled the regime, only to see unemployment rise from zero to 30 per cent, and rent increases of 600 per cent. They saw the ancient university library building sold to become a private house, while Japanese entrepreneurs were negotiating to transform the central university building into an international hotel. In the old city, the decaying warehouses were unchanged, except that each now bears the nameplate of a West German company waiting to resell them in five years' time. The nearest parallel, Siobhan felt, was with St Katharine's Dock in London.

She was conscious of the tragedy of betrayed hopes. "Everyone had wanted a more free society. They developed their own unofficial networks in spite of the regime. They weren't asking for a choice of washing powders. It might have been exciting to watch West German TV once, but it isn't any longer. They now have consumer education programmes beamed at them to tell them *how* to choose washing powders, when what they want is the chance to use the media themselves and to examine what is happening on their doorstep."