

**where**  
Between Ideology  
**students**  
and Improvisation:  
**once**  
**danced**  
Youth Clubs,  
Spatial Appropriation and  
Autonomy in the GDR

*Where students once danced*

*Between Ideology and Improvisation:  
Youth Clubs, Spatial Appropriation and Autonomy in the GDR*

## ***Abstract***

This thesis examines how semi-public youth space in the GDR was materially organized through planning, access, spatial routine, labour and repeated use. Its central case study is the Dicker Turm in Görlitz, a medieval tower gradually transformed into a student club through structural repair, institutional handover, technical adaptation and sustained student work. Rather than treating youth clubs either as instruments of control or as islands of freedom, the thesis argues that they were negotiated spaces in which official order and everyday practice never fully coincided. Görlitz provides a particularly sharp setting for this question because educational life, organized leisure, border urbanity and adaptable existing structures overlapped there. Methodologically, the study combines archival building files, technical documents, newspaper articles, retrospective press coverage, an interview conducted by the author and selected Facebook posts. Read together, these fragmentary sources make it possible to reconstruct the Dicker Turm not simply as a planned setting, but as a lived and remembered space. The thesis argues that the club became historically significant not only because of what it was meant to be, but because of how it was institutionally produced, materially constrained, socially sustained and later remembered. In doing so, it contributes to architectural history by showing how semi-public spaces become historically legible through thresholds, routines, material constraint and repeated use.

## ***Keywords***

*Micro-politics   Youth culture   Tolerated Autonomy   Spatial Appropriation   Late socialism*



*Fig. 1. Photographic documentation of the lantern roof structure in the Dicker Turm, showing diagonal bracing of the posts and the later disco-ball installation. Building Archive Görlitz, Grdb.-Nr. 10690, Bauakte Bd. 1, p. 18.*

## i. introduction

The Dicker Turm was not entered like an ordinary club. One first moved through a small side tower, then upward through a winding staircase into the larger tower. The lower level held the bar, both levels had tables and chairs along an outer ring and the upper level placed the dance floor in the middle so that people could sit at the edge and still watch what happened in the centre.<sup>1</sup> That arrangement matters because it makes the argument visible from the start. A youth club is not only a program or an institution. It is also a spatial situation: a sequence of thresholds, stairs, controls, views and routines that shapes who comes in, how bodies move, where people gather and what kind of collective life becomes possible.

This thesis investigates how semi-public youth space was produced in the late GDR through architecture, institutional planning, everyday routines and use. Its central case study is the Dicker Turm in Görlitz, a medieval tower that was gradually turned into a student club through structural repair, technical adaptation, formal handover and later sustained use.<sup>2</sup> This thesis asks how a specific space became workable as a youth club and how it generated limited forms of autonomy within a system that officially sought to organise culture and leisure.

Space is not neutral. Social space is produced. Lefebvre's claim that "(social) space is a (social) product" shifts attention away from buildings as passive containers and toward spaces as historical formations made through institutions, labour, routines and repeated use.<sup>3</sup> He also insists that produced space is never innocent: it serves "as a tool of thought and of action," but also as a means of production, domination and power, even while escaping full command.<sup>4</sup> The Dicker Turm is therefore not treated first as a building and only afterwards as a social setting. It is read as a space whose meaning was continuously made through planning, repair, access, event formats and use. Lefebvre's triad keeps those layers together: the conceived, the perceived and the lived are analytically distinct, but their relations are "never either simple or stable".<sup>5</sup>

This spatial lens is also political, but not only in the narrow sense of official ideology. Politics names the institutions and practices that organize an order, while the political names the conflictual condition that makes every order contingent rather than final.<sup>6</sup> That distinction matters because youth spaces in the GDR were not simply spaces where politics later appeared. They were part of how order was arranged in the first place. Access, visibility, sound, supervision and the difference between open and closed events all mattered. Every order is only a "temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices".<sup>7</sup> That is how the Dicker Turm is read here: not as a stable ideological container, but as a space whose order had to be assembled through contracts, repairs, event routines and repeated participation. Bayat sharpens this further by showing that autonomy is never an absolute property of a place. It emerges unevenly and often within ordinary practice rather than in dramatic acts of resistance. He describes encroachment as the "silent, protracted, but pervasive advancement of the ordinary" and

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<sup>1</sup> Nannett Dalkowski, 'Interview Memories of the Student Times in the Club', 14 March 2026, online.

<sup>2</sup> Rico Rokitte, *Zum 30. Geburtstag Längst Geschichte*, Görlitzer Nachrichten, (Görlitz), 31 December 2004, SZ Archive.; Ralph Schermann, *Das Dicke Ding Am Görlitzer Marienplatz*, Heimatgeschichte, (Görlitz), 1 October 2024, SZ Archive.

<sup>3</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1991), 30.

<sup>4</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 33, 38-39, 46.

<sup>6</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (Routledge, 2011), 9, 22.

<sup>7</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 22.

ties the space for autonomy directly to the unequal “capacity to exercise surveillance”.<sup>8</sup> What is at stake in the Dicker Turm is therefore not heroic resistance, but limited autonomy produced inside constraint.

This also shapes how the thesis positions itself within existing work on the GDR. Much research on popular culture in the DDR has been pulled between two strong images: repression and paternalism on the one hand and cultural self-assertion or *Eigensinn* on the other. Ege names this tension directly. He notes that post-1989 writing repeatedly asked to what extent “*kulturelle Selbstbehauptung*” could exist despite repression and paternalism and he argues that the simple image of a completely “*durchherrschte Gesellschaft*” is not enough. At the same time, he insists that one also has to take seriously the productive techniques of state power, guidance, support and control; and above all the interaction of program and practice.<sup>9</sup> Wolf moves in a similar direction. She does not only reconstruct official cultural aims, but asks what programs and formats were actually tested, which instructions existed and which freedoms were used in practice.<sup>10</sup> This thesis builds on that line of work. Instead of treating youth clubs only as ideological institutions or only as islands of freedom, it reads them as everyday semi-public spaces in which order was produced, negotiated, adjusted and sometimes loosened through spatial practice.

The wider GDR context makes that question more concrete. Culture in the DDR had a state mandate and youth clubs were expected to contribute to education, participation and socialist social life.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, youth culture cannot be reduced to propaganda from above. Jahn shows that important forms of youth cultural life in the 1960s grew partly out of the interests of young people themselves before they were more strongly incorporated into SED and FDJ frameworks.<sup>12</sup> Ege shows the same tension from another side. Discotheques were one of the major success stories of late-socialist leisure culture, but they were rarely fixed building types; they were events produced in existing halls, *Kulturhäuser* and *Jugendklubs* through sound, light, furniture and setup.<sup>13</sup> Youth leisure space in the late GDR was therefore not simply designed once and then used. It was repeatedly produced in practice.

Görlitz offers a particularly sharp setting for these questions because several conditions overlapped there. It was an educational and industrial town, it had an organized youth culture and it was structurally shaped by the border to Poland. The “borders of friendship” after 1972 made travel between East Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia much easier and turned border cities into places of movement, comparison and exchange in everyday life.<sup>14</sup> Görlitz and Zgorzelec also appear directly as a site of cross-border shopping and exchange, especially around the Saturday *Handelsmarkt* and the experience of consumption and mobility.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, border effects were uneven rather than uniform. Their relevance varied according to language, contact and everyday practice.<sup>16</sup> The Dicker Turm was located

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<sup>8</sup> Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 56, 60-61.

<sup>9</sup> Moritz Ege, ‘Diskotheken in Der DDR: Populäre Kultur Zwischen Instituierung Und Kontrolle’, in *Volkskunde in Sachsen*, vol. 21 (w.e.b. Universitätsverlag und Buchhandel GmbH, 2009), <https://www.zora.uzh.ch/id/eprint/27008/>, 118-121, 146, 183, 189.

<sup>10</sup> Birgit Wolf, ‘Kulturvermittlung in Der DDR Zwischen Auftrag Und Wirklichkeit’, *Kulturelle Bildung Online*, 22 September 2021, <https://www.kubi-online.de/artikel/kulturvermittlung-ddr-zwischen-auftrag-wirklichkeit>, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Wolf, ‘Kulturvermittlung in Der DDR Zwischen Auftrag Und Wirklichkeit’, 1-2.

<sup>12</sup> Hagen Jahn, ‘Jugend, Musik Und Ideologie. Zur Geschichte Der FDJ-Singebewegung’, *Hallische Beiträge Zur Zeitgeschichte* (Halle (Saale)) 12 (2002): 5-7.

<sup>13</sup> Ege, ‘Diskotheken in Der DDR: Populäre Kultur Zwischen Instituierung Und Kontrolle’, 115-117.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Aaron Keck-Szajbel, ‘The Borders of Friendship: Transnational Travel and Tourism in the East Bloc, 1972-1989’ (Doctoral dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2013), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/01z3n1qx>, 1-2.

<sup>15</sup> Keck-Szajbel, ‘The Borders of Friendship: Transnational Travel and Tourism in the East Bloc, 1972-1989’, 32-33, 37.

<sup>16</sup> Gertrude Andrea Nicole Ehlers, ‘The Binational City Eurode: The Social Legitimacy of a Border-Crossing Town’ (Doctoral dissertation, Radboud University Nijmegen, 2007), <https://hdl.handle.net/2066/30926>, 198-199.

in a border city, but in later memory it appears much more as a socially filtered student space tied to a German-speaking *Hochschulmilieu* than as a direct cross-border contact zone.<sup>17</sup>

Methodologically, the thesis combines different kinds of evidence that illuminate the Dicker Turm from complementary angles. The main primary sources are the building files from the Ratsarchiv Görlitz, with material on the tower's conversion into a student club and later the "Nutzungsuntersagung 'Studentenclub' 1998," preservation and monument-administrative afterlife of the tower.<sup>18</sup> These archival materials are read together with newspaper clippings, retrospective press coverage, an interview conducted by the author and selected Facebook posts. The newspapers reconstruct programming, public visibility and retrospective narratives of the club. The interview and social-media posts are not treated as straightforward factual records for the 1970s and 1980s, but as sources of spatial memory, continuity of practice and later meaning-making. The interview is used to recover remembered layout, labour, atmosphere and post-socialist continuity. The point is not to overcome fragmentary evidence, but to read the fragmentary itself as part of the history of a semi-visible space.

The Dicker Turm should not be read as an exception outside the socialist city, but as a revealing space within it. The following chapters examine how it was institutionally produced through the city, the Ingenieurschule, the FDJ, technical approvals and material adaptation; how it was socially sustained through routines, labour and recurring use; and how forms of limited autonomy emerged in the gap between what was planned, what the building materially allowed and what users repeatedly made of it. In this way, the thesis contributes to architectural history not through a new monument or architect, but through a sharper method for reading how architecture participates in the organisation of everyday life.

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<sup>17</sup> Dalkowski, 'Interview Memories of the Student Times in the Club'.

<sup>18</sup> Stadtverwaltung Görlitz, 'Bauakte Grdb.-Nr. 10690 Marienplatz 7 (Dicker Turm), Bd. I', in *Bestand SBZ - DDR / Stadtverwaltung Görlitz*, Bd. I, Ratsarchiv Görlitz, n.d.; Stadtverwaltung Görlitz, 'Bauakte Grdb.-Nr. 10690 Marienplatz 7 (Dicker Turm), Bd. II', BG-Nr. 322/98, in *Bestand SBZ - DDR / Stadtverwaltung Görlitz*, Bd. II, no. zdA 10690/5, Ratsarchiv Görlitz, 19 January 2022.

## ii. youth culture in görlitz

### *a city that had to organize leisure*

Görlitz matters here not as background, but as a place where several pressures met at once. Youth leisure in the late GDR was not left open and undefined. It had to be organized, framed and made socially useful. Culture was expected to do something: it had to educate, integrate and stabilize everyday socialist life. Youth clubs belonged to that effort. They were meant to offer meaningful leisure, but also to shape behavior, discussion and collective values. At the same time, they could not survive as purely pedagogical institutions. By the 1980s, youth-club work was expected not only to follow official goals, but also to satisfy existing interests and respond to actual demand.<sup>19</sup> Görlitz therefore has to be read as a place where leisure was organized, but never fully determined in advance.

This tension changes how youth culture in Görlitz should be described. It was neither simply controlled nor simply free. Organized leisure always had to absorb initiative, taste and expectation from the people using it. Youth-oriented cultural forms in the GDR did not simply descend from the SED and FDJ fully formed. They also grew out of the interests, media worlds and musical practices of young people themselves. The 1963 communiqué *Der Jugend Vertrauen und Verantwortung* belongs to that story. It shows that the state did not only prohibit. It also tried to govern through selective permission, limited responsibility and managed self-activity.<sup>20</sup> Görlitz should therefore be understood as a late-socialist city in which leisure was institutionally framed, but still had to remain socially desirable.

The city also needs to be seen as more than simply the location of the Dicker Turm. It was an educational town, it had organized cultural institutions and youth-oriented infrastructure already had an urban presence. In the wider GDR context, such institutions were often not single-purpose buildings, but flexible settings that combined multipurpose halls, circle spaces, café functions, dance events and changing programs for different groups.<sup>21</sup> Görlitz should therefore be approached not as a city that merely contained youth culture, but as one in which educational life and organized leisure already overlapped in a dense and urban way. The Dicker Turm later condensed that condition rather than standing apart from it.

### *the border as urban condition, not every space a border space*

Görlitz also has to be read as a border city. Its location next to Poland shaped the city's late-socialist atmosphere in a very real way. After 1972, easier travel between East Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia turned border regions into places where movement, comparison and curiosity entered everyday life more strongly than before.<sup>22</sup> Görlitz and Zgorzelec appear directly in this context as places of exchange, especially around shopping, consumption and the Saturday *Handelsmarkt*, where different everyday worlds became visibly entangled in one urban field.<sup>23</sup> The border was not only a political line on a map. It entered the city as an urban condition. As Fig. 2 shows, Görlitz and Zgorzelec formed a divided but still spatially legible urban field across the Neisse, making the border visible not only politically but also in the city's basic urban structure.

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<sup>19</sup> Wolf, 'Kulturvermittlung in Der DDR Zwischen Auftrag Und Wirklichkeit', 1-2.

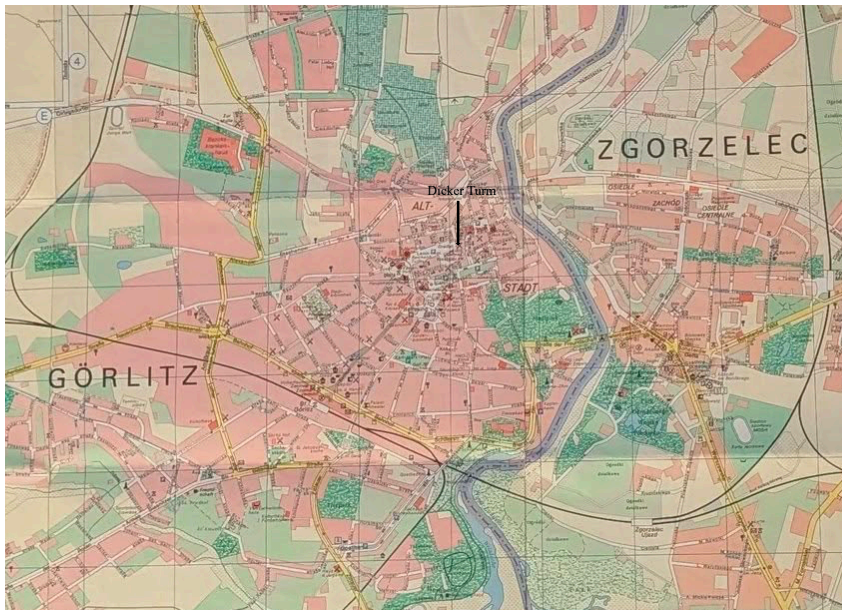
<sup>20</sup> Jahn, 'Jugend, Musik Und Ideologie. Zur Geschichte Der FDJ-Singebewegung', 5-7.

<sup>21</sup> Wolf, 'Kulturvermittlung in Der DDR Zwischen Auftrag Und Wirklichkeit', 1-3.

<sup>22</sup> Keck-Szajbel, 'The Borders of Friendship: Transnational Travel and Tourism in the East Bloc, 1972-1989', 2.

<sup>23</sup> Keck-Szajbel, 'The Borders of Friendship: Transnational Travel and Tourism in the East Bloc, 1972-1989', 32-33, 37.

But the border did not shape every space in Görlitz with the same intensity. Its practical relevance depended on language, social contact and everyday routine. A market, a shopping route, or a deliberately cross-border event registered the border differently from a student space. In that sense, Görlitz was structurally divided, but not every space in Görlitz was equally a border space.<sup>24</sup> This distinction matters because it prevents the whole city from collapsing into one border narrative. The border was one condition among several, not the only one. It formed part of the setting of the Dicker Turm, but more as a wider urban background than as the defining feature of the club space itself.



*Fig. 2. Joint city plan of Görlitz and Zgorzelec, showing the postwar division of the city across the Neisse and the continued spatial relation between the two urban halves. Shared on Facebook in “Unser Görlitz”, 18 February 2026, original source unidentified.*

*spaces that could become something else*

A strong link to the case study lies in the way youth culture occupied and transformed existing spaces. Youth leisure in the late GDR often depended on spaces that could become something else for a night or for a program. Discotheques were not primarily stable architectural types. In the language of the time, “*Diskotheken*” referred first of all to DJs, technicians and temporary constellations in multifunctional spaces. A hall in a Kulturhaus or a Jugendklub became a disco through presence, setup, light and performance.<sup>25</sup> That detail shifts the argument away from static building categories and toward spatial production through use. Youth leisure space was repeatedly made in practice.

This is also why youth clubs matter so much in the story. The development of discotheques was closely tied to the development of *Jugendklubs*, which often functioned as carriers of disco events from the mid-1960s onward.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, these formats did not originate simply in what institutions wanted. Their beginnings lay partly outside official planning and institutions later tried to absorb and reshape them rather than invent them from nothing.<sup>27</sup> Organized leisure in Görlitz was therefore not simply delivered into the city in finished form. It was pieced together through a relation between institutions and youth demand, between planning and adaptation.

<sup>24</sup> Ehlers, ‘The Binational City Eurode: The Social Legitimacy of a Border-Crossing Town’, 198-199.

<sup>25</sup> Ege, ‘Diskotheken in Der DDR: Populäre Kultur Zwischen Instituierung Und Kontrolle’, 115-117.

<sup>26</sup> Ege, ‘Diskotheken in Der DDR: Populäre Kultur Zwischen Instituierung Und Kontrolle’, 126.

<sup>27</sup> Ege, ‘Diskotheken in Der DDR: Populäre Kultur Zwischen Instituierung Und Kontrolle’, 127.

This relation becomes even clearer when one looks at why such spaces succeeded or failed. Youth leisure could not simply be decreed. It depended on attraction, rhythm and whether people actually wanted to come. Ege's phrase "*Abstimmung mit den Füßen*" captures this exactly: people stayed away from events that did not interest them and this forced even highly regulated leisure forms to respond to actual preferences.<sup>28</sup> Görlitz should therefore not be read only through institutions, regulations or official goals. It also has to be read through the social necessity of making space desirable. A space had to feel worth entering.

Görlitz matters here not simply as the setting of the Dicker Turm, but as the condition that made such a space possible in the first place. In this city, student life, organized leisure, institutional control, border urbanity and reusable spaces overlapped in a particularly dense way. That overlap is the real context of the case study. The Dicker Turm did not emerge outside the socialist city and it was not a spontaneous free space that somehow escaped it. It emerged from within a late-socialist urban order that provided leisure, regulated it and at the same time relied on existing spaces being repeatedly adapted, programmed and socially sustained. The educational setting mattered because it supplied the user group and institutional framework. The border mattered because it shaped the wider urban atmosphere of Görlitz, even if not every space registered it equally. The material fabric mattered because spaces like the Dicker Turm could become something else without ever becoming neutral.

The case study therefore moves from Görlitz to the Dicker Turm not by narrowing the argument, but by sharpening it: the next chapter asks how one historically layered space was institutionally produced, technically transformed and socially kept alive. And how limited forms of autonomy could emerge precisely within a system that officially sought to plan and organize space. The historic view of the tower in Fig. 3 helps situate that shift visually by showing the Dicker Turm as part of the wider urban fabric before the chapter turns to its internal transformation.

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<sup>28</sup> Ege, 'Diskotheken in Der DDR: Populäre Kultur Zwischen Instituierung Und Kontrolle', 128.



*Fig. 3. Historic view of the Dicker Turm, c. 1958, shared by Gaby Lungwitz in Unser Görlitz on Facebook, 14 December 2024, from the collection Görlitz auf Ansichtskarten, original source unidentified.*

### iii. dicker turm

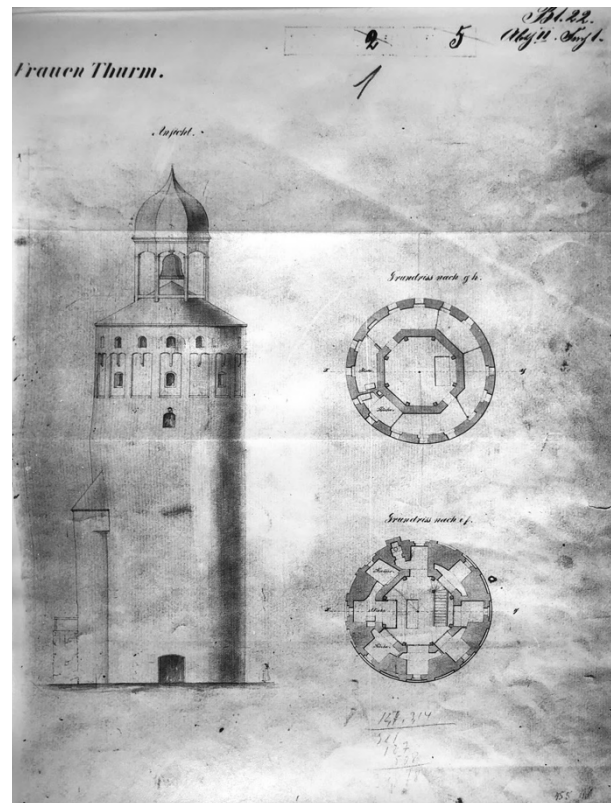
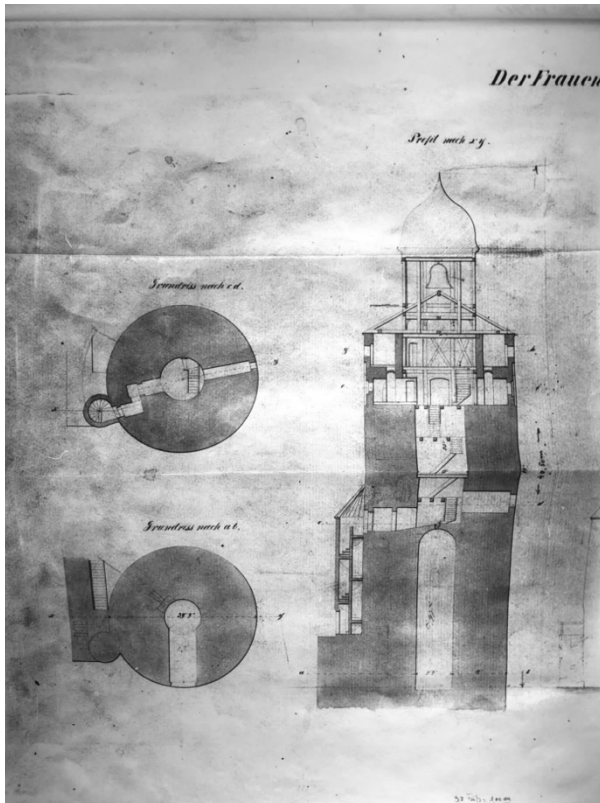


Fig. 4. Historic drawing of the Frauen Thurm, section and two floor plans, 1805. Building Archive Görlitz, Grdb.-Nr. 10690, Bauakte Bd. II.

Fig. 5. Historic drawing of the Frauen Thurm, elevation and two floor plans, 1805. Building Archive Görlitz, Grdb.-Nr. 10690, Bauakte Bd. II.

#### *a space must be made*

The Dicker Turm did not become a student club because space happened to be available. It became one because a damaged and historically loaded tower was slowly pulled into a new social role. Before there was music, a bar or a full dance floor, there was a building that cracked, weathered and demanded attention. The tower's earlier spatial structure is already visible in the historic drawings (Figs. 4–5), which show how the later student-club use was inserted into a much older built form rather than into a neutral shell. The early archival record is dominated by danger, temporary securing measures, missing money and work that should already have happened but kept being delayed.<sup>29</sup> By the time students finally moved in, they did not take over a finished shell. They inherited a space that had already been negotiated for years. That long prehistory stayed inside the club. The Dicker Turm never felt like a cleanly designed youth space because it had not started that way. It carried the stubbornness of the building into its later social life.

The decisive turn came when the city handed the tower over to the *Ingenieurschule* for expansion and use as a student club. From that moment on, the tower was no longer only a monument problem. It became a project shared by the city, the school, the FDJ, monument advice and public funding structures.<sup>30</sup> But even then, the space did not move smoothly from plan to use. It still had to wait for approvals, for architects, for the *Bauaufsicht* and for labour brigades who were only available in short

<sup>29</sup> Stadtverwaltung Görlitz, 'Bauakte Grdb.-Nr. 10690 Marienplatz 7 (Dicker Turm), Bd. I'.

<sup>30</sup> Stadtverwaltung Görlitz, 'Bauakte Grdb.-Nr. 10690 Marienplatz 7 (Dicker Turm), Bd. I'.

windows.<sup>31</sup> What later looks like a founding moment was, in practice, a slow catching-up between intention and possibility. The space was produced through delay as much as through decision. That is one reason it never became a neutral institutional space. It remained a negotiated one.

Later recollections shortened this drawn-out process into a much clearer public story: students put in almost 40,000 hours of *Eigenarbeit*, youth brigades from *Waggonbau* and *Wasserwirtschaft* helped and in October 1974 the FDJ student club finally opened in the former defensive tower.<sup>32</sup> Another retrospective article adds the earlier FDJ impulse from 1967, more than 300 voluntary *Aufbau* hours and the opening of “Studentenklub 25” with a Turmcafé on 2 October 1974.<sup>33</sup> Read together, archive and press do not point to one neat beginning. They show how the tower first had to be stabilized, then institutionally enabled and only gradually became socially real.

### *how the tower organized the night*

Once the club existed, it did not work like a flat hall that could host almost anything. The tower organized the evening before the evening even started. One entered through a smaller side tower, climbed upward, passed the controlled entry near the toilets and only then reached the main club levels.<sup>34</sup> Arrival was already filtered by the building. The stairs, the turns, the height and the narrowness were not background conditions. They were part of the social logic of the place. The space had to be reached.

Inside, the layout kept shaping the way people related to one another. The lower level held the bar, both levels had tables and chairs around the outside and the upper level placed the dance floor in the middle.<sup>35</sup> That arrangement did more than organize furniture. It organized attention. This organisation is especially clear in the 1978 proposal drawings (Figs. 6–9), where the bar, seating niches and central dance area make the relation between centre, edge and circulation legible in plan and section. One could sit at the edge, talk, drink and still remain tied to the centre. Later descriptions confirm the same spatial picture: two club floors, separated seating zones, a bar, a small dance floor, hanging lamps, very narrow sanitary spaces and a staircase system that remained part of the whole experience.<sup>36</sup> Even the club’s capacity, roughly ninety to one hundred places, was small enough that a full space quickly became very full.<sup>37</sup> The Dicker Turm worked as a compact, vertical and capacity-limited interior in which the relation between centre and edge mattered all the time.

The archive preserves the same spatial logic in a different language. Heating and lighting had to be introduced, but without erasing the tower’s rough material character. Electrical lines had to remain visible because of the natural-stone masonry.<sup>38</sup> The dance floor, meanwhile, entered the static report as a load-bearing question. The beams beneath it had to be checked for the new student-club use.<sup>39</sup> Dancing appears here not as atmosphere, but as weight. The club existed first as stairs, wiring, beams and surfaces before it existed as lived interior. That is one of the clearest moments where conceived space and lived

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<sup>31</sup> Stadtverwaltung Görlitz, ‘Bauakte Grdb.-Nr. 10690 Marienplatz 7 (Dicker Turm), Bd. I’.

<sup>32</sup> Rokitte, *Zum 30. Geburtstag Längst Geschichte*.

<sup>33</sup> Schermann, *Das Dicke Ding Am Görlitzer Marienplatz*.

<sup>34</sup> Dalkowski, ‘Interview Memories of the Student Times in the Club’.

<sup>35</sup> Dalkowski, ‘Interview Memories of the Student Times in the Club’.

<sup>36</sup> Schermann, *Das Dicke Ding Am Görlitzer Marienplatz*.

<sup>37</sup> *Der Dicke Erwartet Gäste*, n.d.; Stefan Richter, *Mit Studenten Zog Wieder Junges Leben in Den Alten Turm*, n.d., Private Collection.

<sup>38</sup> Stadtverwaltung Görlitz, ‘Bauakte Grdb.-Nr. 10690 Marienplatz 7 (Dicker Turm), Bd. II’.

<sup>39</sup> Stadtverwaltung Görlitz, ‘Bauakte Grdb.-Nr. 10690 Marienplatz 7 (Dicker Turm), Bd. I’.

space touch each other directly.<sup>40</sup> The functional section and wall development drawings (Figs. 6–7) show this especially well by recording the club first as technical arrangement and material intervention rather than atmosphere.

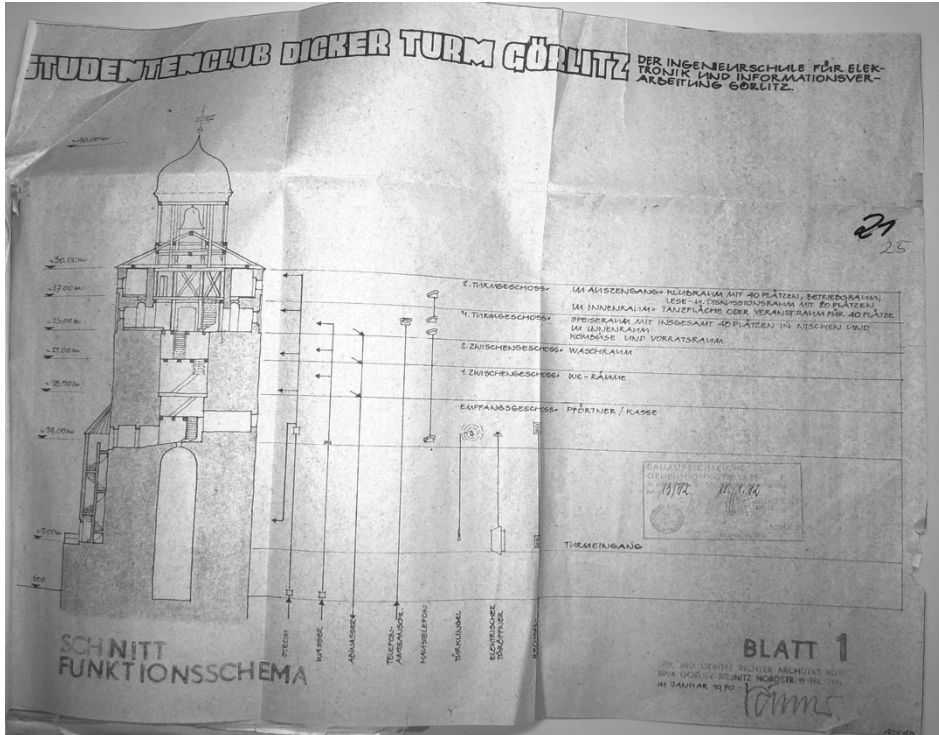


Fig. 6. Student club proposal for the Dicker Turm, functional section diagram, Blatt 1, January 1978. Building Archive Görlitz, Grdb.-Nr. 10690, Bauakte Bd. I.

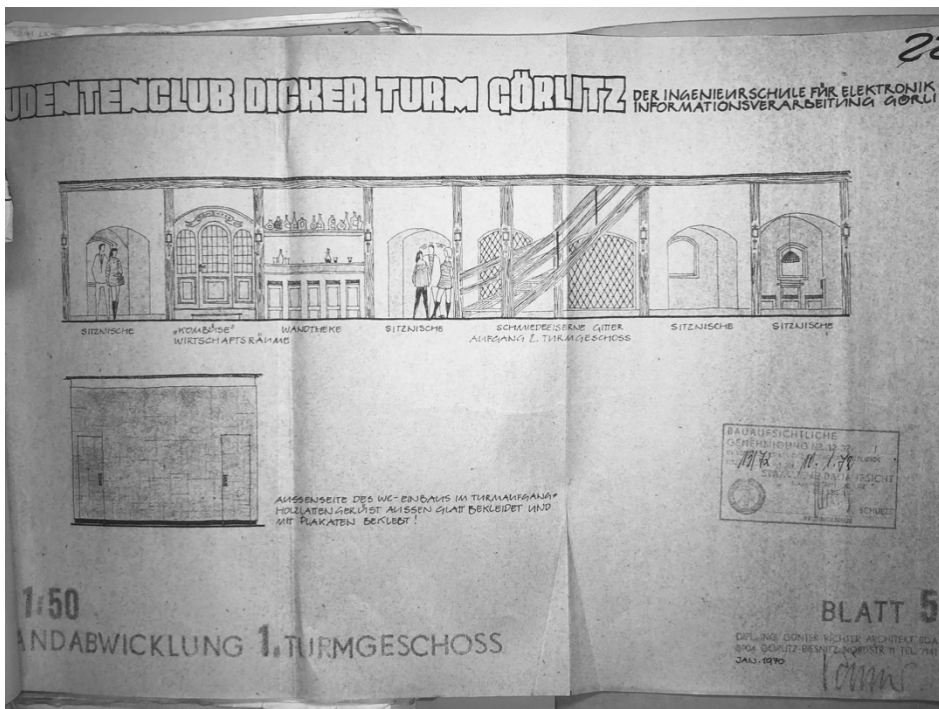


Fig. 7. Student club proposal for the Dicker Turm, wall development of the first tower floor, Blatt 5, January 1978. Building Archive Görlitz, Grdb.-Nr. 10690, Bauakte Bd. I.

<sup>40</sup> Stadtverwaltung Görlitz, 'Bauakte Grdb.-Nr. 10690 Marienplatz 7 (Dicker Turm), Bd. I'; Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 38-39.

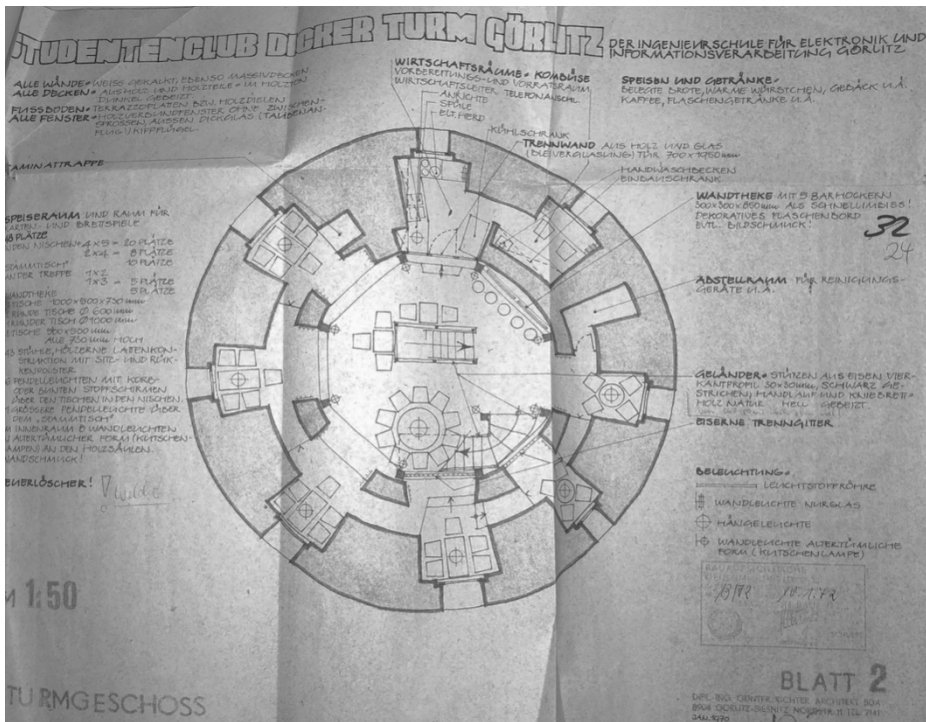


Fig. 8. Student club proposal for the Dicker Turm, tower-floor plan with bar, seating niches, central dance area, Blatt 2, January 1978. Building Archive Görlitz, Grdb.-Nr. 10690, Bauakte Bd. I.

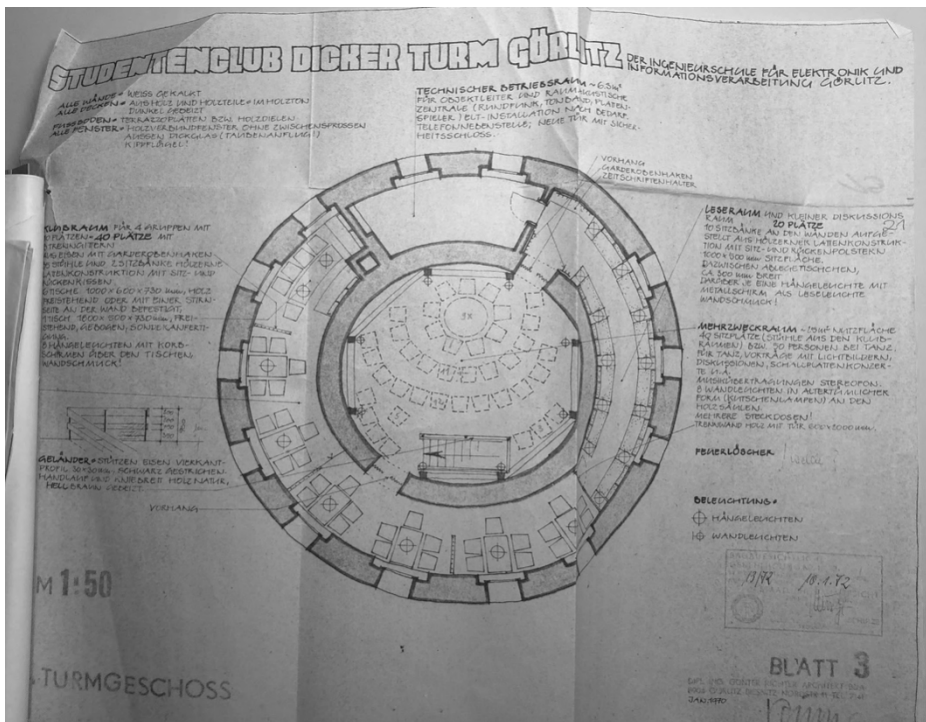


Fig. 9. Student club proposal for the Dicker Turm, tower-floor plan, Blatt 3, January 1978. Building Archive Görlitz, Grdb.-Nr. 10690, Bauakte Bd. I.

*student labour and the production of atmosphere*

A night in the Dicker Turm did not simply happen because the space existed. It had to be made. Drinks had to be carried up from below, the bar had to be staffed, entry had to be controlled, music had to run and someone had to keep the whole sequence together until the end.<sup>41</sup> Leisure was not simply consumed here. It was produced. That changes the way the space should be read. The Dicker Turm was not a place students merely visited. It was a place they had to keep alive. The club therefore functioned less as a finished venue than as a space that depended on continuous spatial labour to remain socially operative.

The building made that labour impossible to ignore. There was no lift. Full crates went upward, empty ones came down again and the climb itself became part of club memory.<sup>42</sup> Even the later Facebook posts keep circling back to that material effort. The titles alone suggest how persistent those bodily traces remained in memory: “*Der Aufstieg zum Dicken*,” “*Treppe zum Dicken Turm*,” “*Dicker Turm Studentenclub*” and “*Ein Club wird 50*” all return not just to the club as institution, but to the act of moving through it and remembering it as a physical place.<sup>43</sup> The space kept forcing itself into memory through stairs, ascent and effort. Circulation was therefore not a neutral background condition, but one of the architectural means through which work, effort and belonging were physically organised and later remembered.

The same closeness shaped the bar and the music. The bar was only a small serving window with a folding board and a tiny room behind it for two or three people at most.<sup>44</sup> Work and participation happened almost on top of one another there. Music also came from inside the student milieu itself. DJs were part of the same social world that also carried crates, ran the bar, checked entry and closed the evening down. The space therefore did not feel outsourced or neutral. It felt assembled from within. Its atmosphere depended less on external polish than on repeated internal labour. What emerged was a highly compressed social space in which service, organisation and participation were spatially entangled rather than clearly separated. The surviving interior and event photographs (Figs. 11–14) confirm how tightly bar work, sociability and performance overlapped in the club space.

That is also why the space seems to have needed so little decoration. Rough stone walls, dark wooden furniture, small windows and the old structure itself already did most of the work.<sup>45</sup> The building’s age was not hidden to make it usable. It became part of the attraction. The Dicker Turm stayed visibly old, visibly awkward and slightly improvised and exactly because of that it remained unlike a normal club. The social atmosphere did not float above the architecture. It was built out of it. The postcard collage in Fig. 10 reinforces this reading by placing the tower’s exterior, its rough interior surfaces and its club rooms within one visual field. Material form did not simply contain the club’s atmosphere, it actively produced it by giving sociability a dense, enclosed and historically charged setting.

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<sup>41</sup> Dalkowski, ‘Interview Memories of the Student Times in the Club’.

<sup>42</sup> Schermann, *Das Dicke Ding Am Görlitzer Marienplatz*.

<sup>43</sup> Gaby Lungwitz, ‘Der Aufstieg zum Dicken’, Facebook, 16 October 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/275615969795031/permalink/1087805578576062/>; Gaby Lungwitz, ‘Treppe zum Dicken Turm’, Facebook, 9 February 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/275615969795031/permalink/1570090330347582/>; Gaby Lungwitz, ‘Dicker Turm Studentenclub’, Facebook, 7 October 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/275615969795031/permalink/1486583048698311/>; Axel Lange, ‘Ein Club wird 50’, Facebook, 6 October 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=8481060485309792&set=a.140346586047932>.

<sup>44</sup> Dalkowski, ‘Interview Memories of the Student Times in the Club’.

<sup>45</sup> Dalkowski, ‘Interview Memories of the Student Times in the Club’.



STUDENTENKLUB  
im Görlitzer  
Dicken Turm

**Fig. 10.** Postcard collage of the student club in the Dicker Turm, shared by Görlitz auf Ansichtskarten on Facebook, 18 December 2024, original source unidentified.



**Fig. 11.** Photographic documentation of the lower hospitality floor in the Dicker Turm, showing the extensive timber interior cladding. Building Archive Görlitz, Grdb.-Nr. 10690, Bauakte Bd. I, p. 11.



**Fig. 12.** Interior view of a social event in the student club of the Dicker Turm, showing guests gathered around the serving counter. SG8141 photo gallery, accessed 4 April 2026, original source unidentified.



*Fig. 13. Interior view of a social gathering in the student club of the Dicker Turm, showing students assembled around a buffet table. SG8141 photo gallery, accessed 4 April 2026. original source unidentified.*



*Fig. 14. Interior view of a social event in the student club of the Dicker Turm, showing a costume performance or party game in front of a seated audience. SG8141 photo gallery, accessed 4 April 2026. original source unidentified.*



Fig. 15. Front and reverse sides of membership cards of the student club Die Türmer e.V. in Görlitz, including a member card for the summer semester 1995, 1996 and winter semester 1997/98. Courtesy of Nannett Preuß, shared with the author, 18 February 2026.



Fig. 16. Honorary membership card (Ehrenmitgliedsausweis) of the FDJ student club Dicker Turm. Reproduced from Radio Lausitz, "100 neue Exponate in DDR-Ausstellung in Görlitz," 2 February 2017.

### *between student space and city venue*

The Dicker Turm was never only a disco. It was also café, lecture space, discussion room, holiday programmes, student meeting point, children's space and city-facing event location. Its life came from that density. The tower could host *Diskotheken*, URANIA lectures, round-table discussions, collective celebrations, holiday childcare, singer-songwriters and visiting delegations while still remaining recognizably the same space.<sup>46</sup> The point was not that the space had one clear function. The point was that it could keep becoming something slightly different without losing its identity. Its identity lay less in a fixed programme than in a repeated spatial framework that could absorb different uses without ceasing to be itself.

The smaller clippings make that especially visible. The tower opened to the general public for café hours with fixed admission slots and ninety available places.<sup>47</sup> It was used for school and holiday formats with slide lectures and club visits for *Feriengestaltung*.<sup>48</sup> During the *FDJ-Studentensommer* 1986, twelve students cared there daily for around one hundred children, while the evenings still belonged to the disco and the weekend to the Turmcafé.<sup>49</sup> The ten-year anniversary became a public event with reception, programme at the foot of the tower, solidarity bazaar, Shashlik bar, Sunday public disco and an exchange with youth-club leaders from the city and district.<sup>50</sup> Even in 1994, the rhythm remained sharply structured: Tuesday student disco, Thursday open to all, Saturday midnight disco every fourteen days, Sunday café and a second branch in the Vogtshof.<sup>51</sup> The space remained socially dense because it was repeatedly reprogrammed. In Lefebvre's sense, the space was therefore not simply given once and then occupied, it was continuously produced through changing programmes, recurring rhythms and repeated use.

That also explains its public character more precisely. The Dicker Turm was neither a purely internal student space nor a fully open city venue. It sat in between. It remained a student club primarily, yet it also projected itself into the city through café openings, public discos, holiday programmes and special events.<sup>52</sup> Non-students often entered only through particular formats or organised occasions, but they did enter.<sup>53</sup> The space was selective, but not sealed off. It operated in a semi-public register. The later membership cards and honorary card (Figs. 15–16) make that institutional and social identity visible in another way, showing how the club continued to define belonging while also projecting itself outward. Its order was therefore neither fully closed nor fully open, but contingent and managed: a precarious articulation of access, use and visibility rather than a stable public category.

### *continuity and the long end*

The political rupture of 1989 altered less immediately than one might expect. Inside the tower, student life continued for a while with surprising continuity. The institutional labels changed, the students reorganised themselves, and later the *Vogtshof* club "*Maus*" joined the same social world, but the Dicker Turm still lived from the same basic logic of stairs, bar, dance floor, narrow circulation and collective

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<sup>46</sup> P. Dörre, *Immer Mobil Im 'Dicken Turm'*, n.d., Private Collection; Richter, *Mit Studenten Zog Wieder Junges Leben in Den Alten Turm*.

<sup>47</sup> *Der Dicke Erwartet Gäste*, SZ.

<sup>48</sup> Johannes Hilbert, *Der Dicke Erwartet Feriengäste*, n.d, SZ.

<sup>49</sup> Petra Dörre, *Ferientspaß Im Dicken Turm*, n.d SZ.

<sup>50</sup> *Der Dicke Feiert Ein Fest*, n.d., Private Collection, SZ.

<sup>51</sup> S. Beutler, *Rund Um Den Dicken Turm Wurde Geburtstag Gefeiert*, n.d, SZ.

<sup>52</sup> Dörre, *Ferientspaß Im Dicken Turm*, SZ., Dörre, *Immer Mobil Im 'Dicken Turm'*, SZ.

<sup>53</sup> Schermann, *Das Dicke Ding Am Görlitzer Marienplatz*, SZ.

work.<sup>54</sup> The space carried its practices more stubbornly than political systems did. What persisted was not an abstract institution alone, but a spatial routine in which architecture and repeated social practice remained tightly bound together.

The end came elsewhere. The club did not close because it had lost meaning. It closed because its social life could no longer satisfy a different regime of regulation. New fire-safety rules, the missing second escape route and the impossibility of expensive rebuilding measures slowly outweighed the possibility of continuing dance events in such a narrow structure.<sup>55</sup> The space that had once seemed adventurous, workable and even desirable suddenly became untenable under a new spatial order. What disappeared was not the desire for the place, but the legal possibility of keeping it open. In the restoration photographs (Figs. 17–18), the former student club reappears less as a lived space than as a scaffolded city object undergoing public reframing. The closure therefore makes especially clear that autonomy here had always been conditional, dependent on a regulatory framework that could be tightened and redefined.

The later memory of the tower makes that loss feel remarkably concrete. The social-media posts keep returning to the tower as place rather than only as institution. They circle around ascent, stairs, the student-club identity of the space and the act of returning to it in memory.<sup>56</sup> They do not replace archive or press, but they preserve something those other sources usually lose: how insistently the space stayed in bodies, habits and recollection. The Dicker Turm survives there less as administrative object than as a scene. What remains visible in these recollections is precisely the lived dimension of space: not just what the tower was meant to be, but how it was bodily inhabited and later remembered.

Seen from that angle, the tower appears not as a fixed object but as a historically produced relation between material form, institutional order and lived use. The archive records repair, contract, wiring and calculation. The newspapers record programme, rhythm, public reach and the club's place in the city. The interview recovers labour, atmosphere, routine and remembered layout; and the social-media posts preserve ascent, crowding, return and the lingering identity of the tower as club. Read together, these traces show how architecture operated not as a passive container but as an active condition of social life. The Dicker Turm was not simply a student club housed in a tower. It was a semi-public space in which physical constraint, institutional framing and repeated use remained tightly bound together. Its historical significance lies in that unstable relation: the space was never fully determined by design, never fully exhausted by administration and never reducible to a single social or political order. That is also why the case matters beyond Görlitz: it shows how everyday socialist space emerged through the uneven fit between conceived order, material conditions and lived practice.

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<sup>54</sup> Rokitte, *Zum 30. Geburtstag Längst Geschichte*; Beutler, *Rund Um Den Dicken Turm Wurde Geburtstag Gefeiert*; Dalkowski, 'Interview Memories of the Student Times in the Club'.

<sup>55</sup> Rokitte, *Zum 30. Geburtstag Längst Geschichte*; Schermann, *Das Dicke Ding Am Görlitzer Marienplatz*; Dalkowski, 'Interview Memories of the Student Times in the Club'.

<sup>56</sup> Lange, 'Ein Club wird 50'; Siegfried Hanzl, 'der dicke Turm - Frauenturm im Wandel 1998 - 1999', Facebook, 28 July 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/275615969795031/permalink/1441274086562541>; Gaby Lungwitz, 'Studentenclub "Dicker Turm", ein Netzfund', Facebook, 16 October 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/275615969795031/permalink/1087807311909222/>; Lungwitz, 'Dicker Turm Studentenclub'; Lungwitz, 'Treppe zum Dicken Turm'.

## iv. conclusion and implications

The Dicker Turm shows that architecture matters here not because it offers a monumental object, but because it makes everyday socialist life materially legible. The space's historical significance does not lie only in the fact that it was an old tower reused as a club. It lies in the way access, stairs, narrowness, centre and edge, bar and dance floor, labour and regulation all became historically active inside one space. Architecture was not just the shell around social life. It was one of the conditions through which that social life was organised, intensified and sometimes limited. The case therefore shifts attention away from architecture as a fixed object and towards architecture as a socially produced relation between planned order, material form and repeated use.

The case also complicates any simple reading of GDR space as either totally controlled or quietly free. The Dicker Turm was institutionally enabled from the beginning. It depended on the city, the school, the FDJ, technical approvals and available labour. At the same time, that framework never fully exhausted the space. The club had to be repeatedly assembled through labour, programming, attendance and social attraction. Its order was never fixed once and for all. It remained contingent, temporary and unstable in precisely the sense described by Mouffe: a precarious articulation of practices that could always have been otherwise.<sup>57</sup> The space therefore makes visible a late-socialist spatial condition in which official structure and lived practice did not coincide cleanly.

What appears in the Dicker Turm is not freedom in a romantic sense, but a limited autonomy produced inside constraint. That matters because it allows the thesis to avoid both exaggeration and reduction. The space was never outside regulation. It remained tied to the school, the city and later to changing safety demands. But neither was it just an obedient space. The social life that developed there depended on the practical limits of supervision, on the labour of its users, on the compactness of its layout and on the fact that the space could not be completely neutralized. Bayat's point that ordinary practices produce uneven space for autonomy under unequal conditions of surveillance is especially useful here.<sup>58</sup> The Dicker Turm shows that different spaces produced different degrees of autonomy not because one was "free" and another was "controlled," but because architecture, institutional attention and routine do not align everywhere in the same way.

Methodologically, the case also suggests a different way of writing architectural history. The Dicker Turm does not survive in one complete archive of intention. It survives in a building file, in technical recalculations, in newspaper programmes, in an interview and in fragmented social-memory traces. The strength of the case study lies precisely there. The space becomes legible not despite those fragmentary sources, but through them. The archive preserves repair, contract, wiring and calculation. The newspapers preserve programme, rhythm, public visibility and city-facing reach. The interview preserves atmosphere, labour and remembered arrangement. The Facebook posts preserve ascent, crowding, return and the lingering identity of the tower as club. Read together, these sources do not merely fill gaps. They expose the layered way in which a semi-public space becomes historical. That offers a methodological contribution to architectural history itself: not only design, style and original purpose matter, but also thresholds, routines, bodily memory and the unstable fit between what a space was meant to be and what people repeatedly made of it.

The Dicker Turm makes visible what architectural history often struggles to capture: how an interior becomes historically significant not only through design and official purpose, but through access, labour,

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<sup>57</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 22.

<sup>58</sup> Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, 56, 60-61.

atmosphere, memory and the repeated negotiation between material form and social use. Many histories of the GDR still move most easily through institutions, ideology and representational buildings. This case instead shows how a semi-visible everyday space can reveal the practical production of order. The restoration images (Figs. 17–18) underline that point by showing how the tower's meaning shifted again once its club life had ended and it re-entered the city primarily as a restored object rather than a lived interior. It also shows how architecture participates in that production not passively, but actively. The stairs filtered entry. The narrowness intensified sociability. The central dance floor reorganised attention. The lack of a lift turned pleasure into labour. The bar's smallness made work and participation overlap. The later closure exposed how fragile that arrangement had always been. In that sense, the Dicker Turm is not only a curious reuse project. It is a concentrated example of how socialist space was made workable, how it remained socially productive and how it later became impossible under a different regulatory order.

What this thesis finally shows is that the Dicker Turm became historically significant not simply because it housed student leisure, but because it made visible the unstable relation between material form, institutional order and lived practice. Its importance lies in demonstrating how everyday socialist space was not only planned and regulated, but repeatedly produced through labour, routine, attraction and use. Read in this way, the Dicker Turm is more than a local case study. It offers a sharper method for architectural history: one that can grasp how semi-public spaces become historically legible through the uneven fit between design, regulation and everyday life.

*Fig. 17. Dicker Turm during the 1998–99 restoration campaign, showing the banner “Viel Trubel um den Dicken” and temporary stands in front of the tower. From the Sammlung Brettschneider, shared by Siegfried Hanzl on Facebook, 28 July 2024, original source unidentified.*



**Fig. 18.** Scaffolded *Dicker Turm* during the 1998–99 restoration campaign, with temporary advertising banner. From the *Sammlung Brettschneider*, shared by Siegfried Hanzl on Facebook, 28 July 2024, *original source unidentified*.



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