

Landwehrkanal

District: Berlin-Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg,
Treptow, Neukölln, Mitte, Charlottenburg

Size: 10,7km

Previous uses: Defense trench (18th century)
Material transport (from 1850)
Sewage canal (from 1890)

Contemporary use: tourism / recreation

Time of realisation: 1845-50 (first permanent construction)
1883-90 (first enlargement)
1936-41 (second enlargement)

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Background information

What is now one of the largest inner city recreational areas hosting some 10.000 trees, scrubs and a large variety of wildlife like bats, herons, ducks as well as birds of prey started as a defense trench far away from the former city limits in the 18th century.

Due to the first wave of industrialisation masses of immigrants hit the city from the middle of the 19th century. The channel was planned to be used first to transport building materials and goods into the city area. However as early as 1840 recreational purposes were envisioned as well. After a comprehensive water sewage system was installed in the late 19th century the channel was also used to carry loads of waste water. Especially after times of heavy rain the water quality deteriorated in such a way, that swimming was definitely no option there any more.

Also shipping traffic increased so rapidly, that the channel had to be widened and deepened twice within a relative short period of time. Isolated from the rest of the Western world after World War II the use of the channel as a long way means of transport practically stopped. When the formal administration of the channel passed from East to West Berlin in 1971 first motorized tourist cruisers started to use the channel. By then both sides of the channel had developed into a “green vein” within the inner city area.

As early as then the deteriorating construction had become a public point of discussion. In 1974 the first trees along the channel were supposed to be cut down in order to carry out reconstruction work. A first movement of opposition arose in the district of Charlottenburg. Alternative ways of reconstruction were found and the trees were saved.

After the fall of the wall with Berlin becoming once again capital of the German state, use of the channel increased massively (within 10 years the number of boats grew to some 8.000 a year carrying close to 1 Mio people) while maintainance of the channel walls was still neglected. When part of the channel walls collapsed right in front of a landing stage in Kreuzberg, the Federal agency of water and shipping services (Wasser- und Schifffahrtsamt) declared a „state of emergency“, claiming it had to cut down some 200 trees immediately and all trees within 3 meters due to reconstruction.

Within a few days an unprecedented manifestation of citizen's protest arose. A group of neighbors formed an action initiative, climbing trees to protect them from being cut down and collecting more than 20.000 protest signatures. The number of trees being cut was reduced to 38. A long term solution is still pending. Each day from 6 p.m. neighbors are organizing on Admiralbrücke to inform the public. Media coverage and donations are welcome.

