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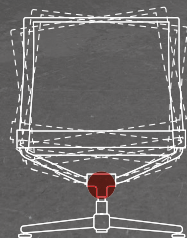
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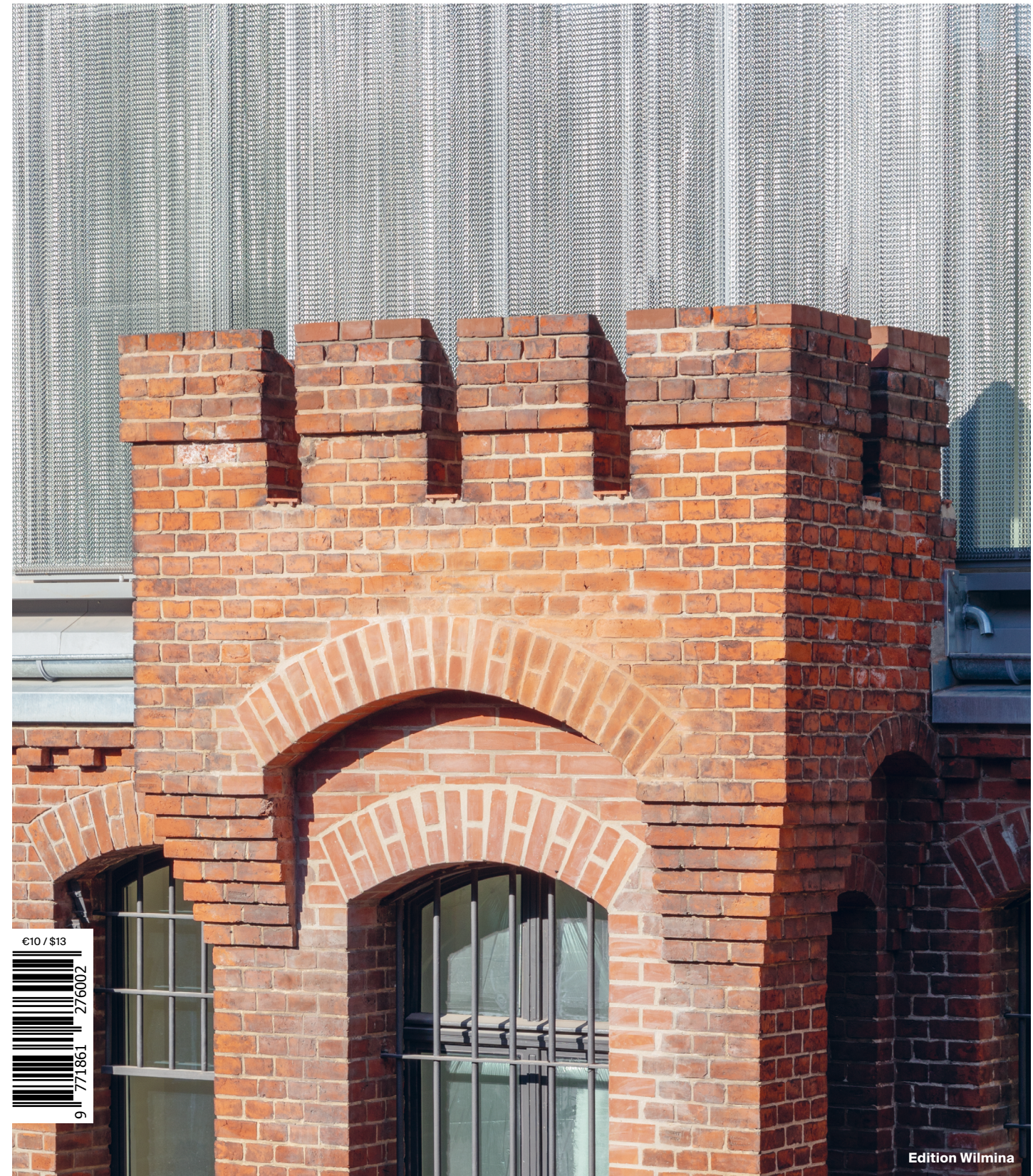
Directions

The Magazine by Design Hotels™ — N°16 2020 — The Promadic Traveler

# Directions

The Magazine by Design Hotels™ — N°16 2020 — The Promadic Traveler

A Journey Down Mexico's Pacific Coast · The Low-Impact Trip · Further: The Traveling Laboratory  
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Edition Wilmina







# A Building Reborn

Grüntuch Ernst Architects, the team behind some of Berlin's most ambitious adaptations, sets out to transform a 120-year-old prison into a unique 44-room boutique hotel, workspace, and retreat—Wilmina, opening summer 2020.

**Words** Sandra Dean  
**Photographs** Patricia Parinejad

In Berlin, a city where history is always close, architecture is never just architecture. It's a historical battleground, a palimpsest, a place of remembrance, and a seedbed for new life. From Sir Norman Foster's futuristic, glass-dome extension of the bombed-out Reichstag, completed in 1999, to David Chipperfield's 2008 adaptation of the Neues Museum on Museum Island, numerous architectural conversions have dealt with Germany's complex history, not by erasing it, but by embracing, adapting, and putting it to new purposes.

Grüntuch Ernst Architects, an internationally renowned practice made up of Armand Grüntuch and Almut Grüntuch-Ernst, is one of the most seasoned firms in the city in negotiating Berlin's post-Wall architectural resurgence. Practicing here since 1991, they built the first big new structure on a former bombed-out plot in Hackescher Markt in 2000. They curated the German Pavilion in the 2006 Venice Architecture Biennale with a focus on urban transformation and conversion and led the adaptation and reprogramming of the Ehemalige Jüdische Mädchenschule, a former Jewish girls' school on Berlin's gallery-laden Auguststrasse that the architects transformed into a complex of cafés, restaurants, and galleries that doubles as a memorial.



**1** Suspended from the ceiling of Wilmina's entrance is a huge Bocci light installation.

**2** The former courthouse on Kantstrasse was built in 1896 by architects Adolf Bürckner and Eduard Fürstenau in an Augsburger Baroque and Wilhelminian style.





**“We see Wilmina as one milestone in the transformation of the city around us in a way that honors its history while also bringing in new life, a fresh mix of people.”**

These projects were concerned not only with the physical transformation of the built environment but with the treatment of its heritage, a sensitive process that Grüntuch Ernst Architects brought to bear on its latest undertaking: the conversion of a former courthouse and women’s prison in Berlin’s Charlottenburg district into a unique 44-room boutique hotel, workspace, and retreat — Wilmina, due for completion in summer 2020.

“We see Wilmina as one milestone in the transformation of the city around us in a way that honors its history while also bringing in new life, a fresh mix of people,” says Armand. The 3,000-square-meter plot of Wilmina stretches from one of the city’s main axes, Kantstrasse, back to Pestalozzistrasse behind, in the heart of Berlin West within walking distance of bustling shopping boulevard Kurfürstendamm and the Rococo Charlottenburg Palace. On Kantstrasse is a former courthouse built in 1896 by architects Adolf Bürckner and Eduard Fürstenau in an Augsburger Baroque and Wilhelminian style. Behind it, a series of transitional courtyards draws guests back from the street to the red-brick former prison buildings.

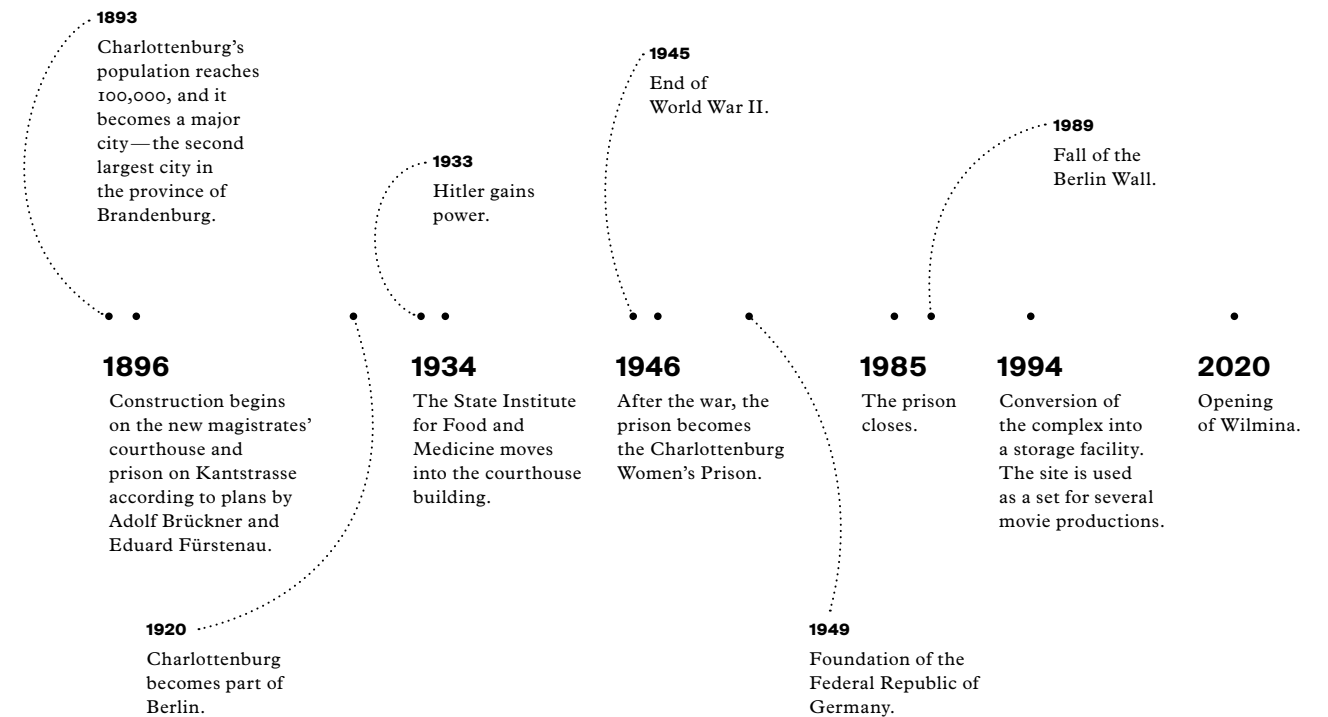
The architects were immediately taken with the space. “From the very first moment we entered it, it was like an enchanted place that was left behind for decades, overgrown with vegetation,” says Almut. “You enter and

are struck by this forgotten feeling. You’re inside this romantic, castle-like structure erected at a time when there were no other buildings around it, and all you hear is birdsong.”

Over the past several years, Grüntuch Ernst Architects set about converting the property, an undertaking complicated by the difficult and rigid building structures. Massively thick 40–50 cm walls and floors had to be cut through to open up access and space. Ways had to be found to combine tiny former prison cell units into comfortable guestrooms with ensuite bathrooms. Wings and rooms that were completely separated from one another needed to be connected without losing the character of the place.

“It’s about inverting the building’s configuration and spatial concepts, from an antisocial space to a very social space,” explains Almut. “Connecting the spaces in surprising and interesting ways was a real challenge.”

But the biggest challenge, undoubtedly, was to navigate the thorny set of ethical, philosophical, and cultural quandaries that arise in an adaptation of this sort. How much of the past should remain visible? What does a respectful adaptation look like? How much intervention is necessary and appropriate? Grüntuch Ernst Architects describes the process as an “ongoing dialogue.”



**1** The current façade in the heart of Berlin West. Photos on page 80 and 82 by Bocci.

**2,4** The 3,000-square-meter plot of Wilmina stretches from Kantstrasse back to the red-brick former prison buildings.

**3** Massively thick 40–50 cm walls and floors had to be cut through to open up access and space.



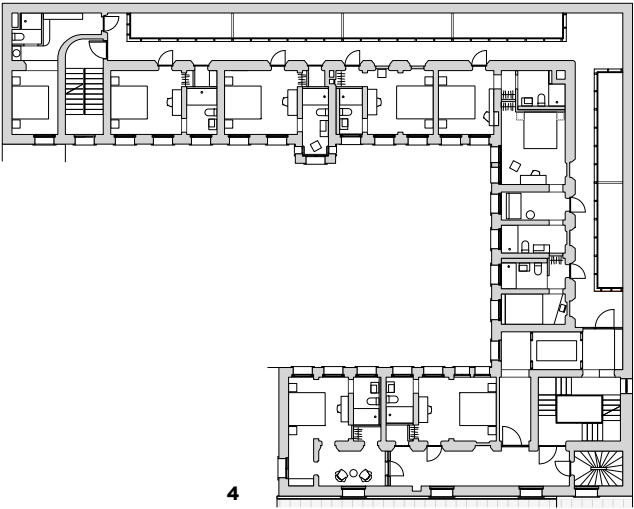
All through the building process, spaces, materials, functions, and fittings have been rethought, renegotiated, and reconfigured as different problems and new solutions came along. Rather than discarding original fittings, the architect-owners found ways to re-appropriate them into the conversion. Some, such as the cell doors, remain in place; others are recycled within the project.

A lot of effort went into finding a balance, they say, “between historical preservation and adaptive reuse for contemporary life.” Wilmina is a place with a past, like so many others in this city, that has been given a new chance, a new lease on life.

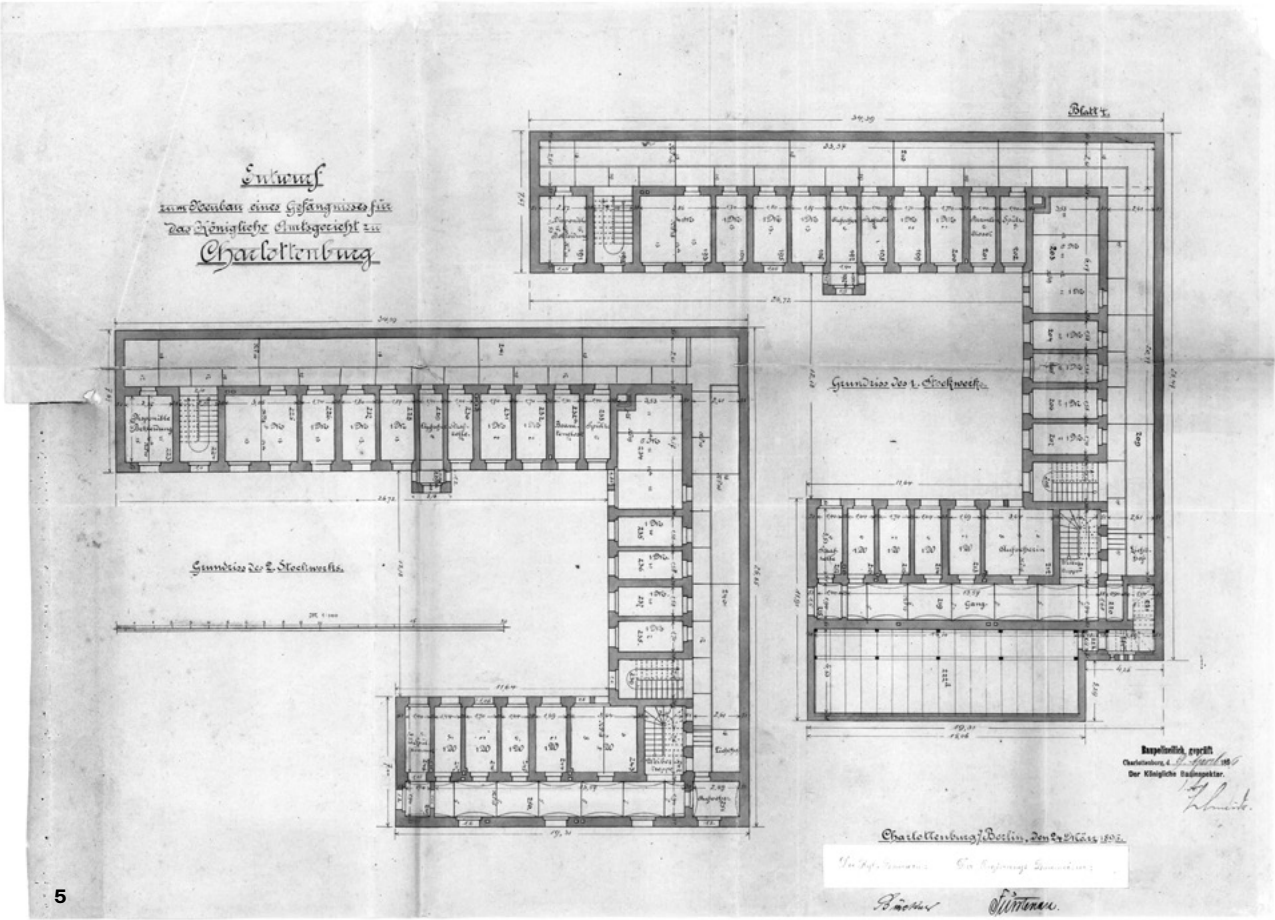
And this past wasn’t always a simple one. During World War II, German resistance and anti-regime activists were held in the prison. After the war, the court building was used as a land registry office, while the prison at the back became a juvenile detention center until 1985 and was used as an archive afterwards until 2010. Later, it became a set for several high-profile historical films, including the Academy Award winner, *The Reader*, starring Kate Winslet and Ralph Fiennes, and the 2016 adaptation of Hans Fallada’s *Alone in Berlin*.

There are many traces of the past that the visitor stumbles across. It is a Chekhovian “show, don’t tell” approach that promises to work well given the delicate subject matter. For those who would like to delve deeper into the topic, the architects have left one cell preserved and untouched to house the archive and history of the site — like a tiny, quiet museum.

Entering the hotel is an experience of discovery: The visitor passes through an archway at the side of the courthouse, into the reception and coffee shop area, then traverses a sequence of gates and courtyards leading into increasing levels of privacy and also, in a way, back in time. The first courtyard is the restaurant’s terrace, leading to the restaurant through a former cellar entrance. Guests pass through a space with a tiny glass-walled forest garden centered on a single old birch tree. Parts of the garden have been untouched for decades, while the previously sealed concrete area has been lavishly planted into full, lush bloom. It all looks as if it has always been there, even though the architects have inserted an entirely new wall made from bricks subtracted from the former prison building beyond.



1 The former prison was the set for several high-profile historical films, including *The Reader* and *Alone in Berlin*.  
2 Bars were kept on the windows but now end midway; the windows having been doubled in size.  
3 The newly built penthouse and original bed-brick prison building.  
4, 5 Floor plans before and after the conversion.





When the visitor enters the third, south-facing courtyard and sees the former prison cell windows, they start to appreciate the strategy of the architects and their construction team. The bars were kept but now end midway; the windows having been doubled in size. The 350-kilogram natural stone windowsills were removed and then slotted back in again. “It’s made of original materials—just relocated in a different way,” says Armand. “We had this strategy of leaving traces of the past throughout the entire building.” Almut adds: “We defined authenticity as an honest compromise between historic preservation and adaptive reuse.”

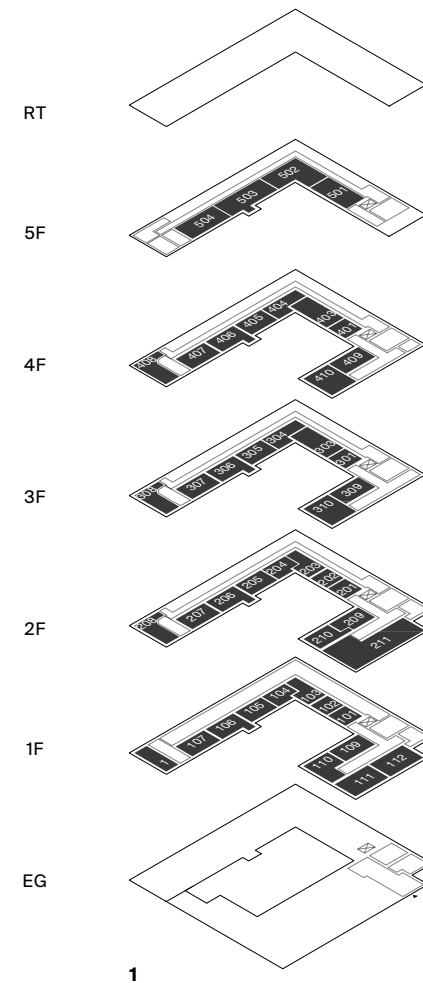
Wilmina’s guestrooms sit within the L-shaped wing of the former cell block and in the former administration building. Unlike the first courtyard, which is the restaurant’s terrace, all other courtyards are the domain of the hotel, providing a high level of privacy and recreation space. Most of the 44 bedrooms are a combination of cells, all decorated in simple, soft, chromatic grays that complement the dominant red-brick exterior coloring. The room variety ranges from very tiny rooms to large corner rooms, full-blown apartments, and penthouse suites.

Five floors of rooms plus an added penthouse are accessed by open walkways stacked above each other in a vast, 18-meter-high interior space. Guests walk past the former prison cell entrances and enter the rooms via original doors. The spatial experience is softened by a huge and delicate light installation of little glass balls of light, like jars of fireflies, suspended from a glass ceiling that, at night, reflects them upwards into what appears to be a never-ending night sky.

“Recovering, discovering the sky and the visual connection to the outside world was a major part of the transformation,” says Almut. “We opened up the visual entity with new view axes wherever possible: from the guestrooms to the outside, from the former cell block to the sky, and from the rooftop all over Charlottenburg,” she continues.

For the architects, whose body of work is in many ways intertwined with the post-Wall transformation of Berlin, it was all about bringing new life into the space, channeling that romantic, forgotten feeling they found when they first arrived, and building a place of peace and relaxation. ■

**“Recovering, discovering the sky and the visual connection to the outside world was a major part of the transformation.”**



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1 Floor plans depicting different levels of the former prison.

2 Almut Grüntuch-Ernst and Armand Grüntuch.

3 The guest traverses a sequence of three courtyards leading into increasing levels of privacy.

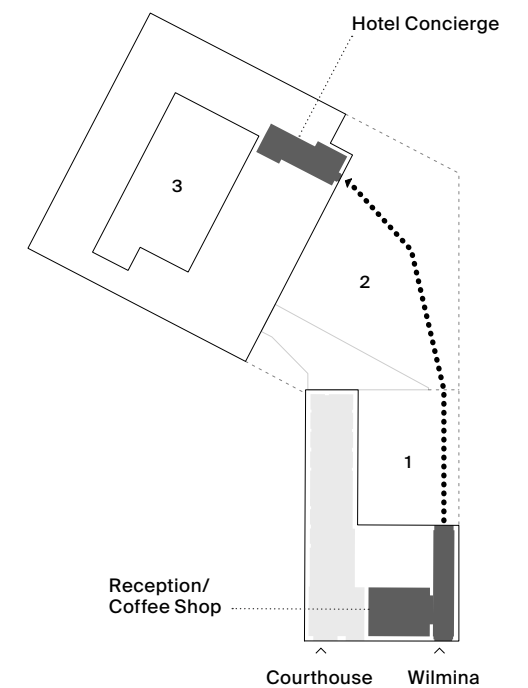
4, 5 Parts of the garden have been untouched for decades, while one section has been lavishly planted into full, lush bloom.



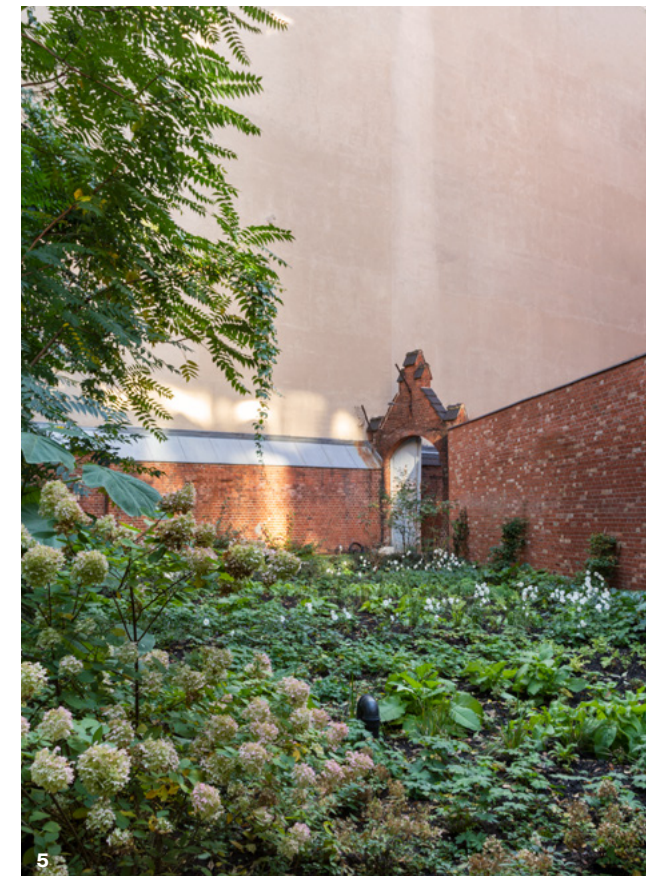
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