

The Abrams Building, Frankfurt

Stephen Richards
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Reading all these accounts of traveling to exotic places to teach for UMUC, I realize how sedentary was my experience with the European Division. I taught English and German from 1979 to 2014, with a spell as a Heidelberg administrator from 2005 to 2011, and lived all that time in Frankfurt am Main (still do) to include commuting back and forth to Heidelberg for those six years. I taught over an area ranging from Giessen in the north to Darmstadt in the south, Wiesbaden in the west to Hanau in the east, with occasional forays further afield to Würzburg, Kitzingen, or even K-Town.

Within that geographical scope, I taught at 40 plus locations, to include half a dozen in Frankfurt in various housing areas and small kasernes, as well as in the Frankfurt Education Center itself, located behind the Abrams Building – the headquarters of V. Corps. The ed. center building, a two-story affair, lacked the architectural grace of the Abrams Building, which had been constructed for the firm of IG Farben a few years before the Nazis came to power. The ed. center was, frankly, dilapidated, and as it became clear in 1994 that Frankfurt would soon close, urgent repairs on the building were abandoned entirely. The mice became bolder and more audible as they scampered through the hollow walls during class time. Once during those final months, I was confronted by a handwritten notice affixed to a stall door in the men's room: "Defected." Even the bathrooms were getting out while they could.

What was then called the Creighton W. Abrams Building – to give it its full name, though not actually dubbed as such until 1975 – is an impressive structure. When it was completed in 1930, it was the largest and most modern office building in Europe with a frontage of 250 and a height of 35 meters, the nine stories diminishing slightly in height towards the top to give the edifice a greater impression of size. It was built in just one year and consists of a 4,600 metric ton steel skeleton onto which the floors, walls and façade were attached. The main structure is slightly curved, such that when you walk the length of the building you cannot see the end of the corridor and have the impression of indefinite distance. The six cross-wings provide plenty of natural light for the open-plan offices. Rumor has it that allied bombers spared the building with an eye to its postwar use, though a more important consideration was likely the POW camp in the adjacent Grunenburg Park.

The Abrams Building provided useful resources for UMUC faculty. There was a barber's shop in the basement offering standard military cuts but willing, for a slightly higher fee, to take special instructions from civilians who just needed to make their shirt collars visible. There was a snack bar in the rotunda at the rear of the building, and up on the top floor a squash court (previously the IG Farben boardroom) in which I played (and lost) several times against Doug Lemmon (see his "Basketball Story"). The squash court is now a library. The post office was also housed there, an institution whose closure in 1994 caused me some anxiety: I had ordered a set of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* – which eventually arrived on the very last day the post office was in operation.

Behind the main structure was a separate edifice designed in the same style, which had originally been the 'Casino' or club for the upper echelons of the IG Farben hierarchy and now housed the Officers Club. Faculty had access by virtue of their GSE-12 status. I recall one evening in 1979 watching a film playing on the screen behind the bar, one I'd seen back at university in the States five years previously when the film had been considered pretty subversive stuff: it was Peter Davis' Vietnam film *Hearts and Minds*. Just half a decade later and all that's history, I thought, light entertainment while you sip a beer.

After everything in Frankfurt closed down and was handed back to the German authorities, there was debate as to what use the Abrams Building should be put. Suggestions included housing the European Central Bank (now in a brand-new skyscraper building close to the Main River in the east of Frankfurt) or the Frankfurt Police Headquarters (now in another brand-new building on the site of the old PX and Commissary). In the end, it was decided to give the building to Frankfurt's Goethe University – thus ensuring that it would be accessible to the public, in contrast to the aforementioned alternatives. The torch of education that had seemed extinguished when the Frankfurt Education Center closed down was thus after all to blaze forth anew on that spot.

The building now houses all the university's humanities, sociology, law, and related departments that had been scattered in many separate buildings over Frankfurt's Bockenheim district. All the libraries for the individual departments are now under one roof. Where once the ramshackle education center stood is the university administration building – one of a dozen or so structures that have transformed the former Abrams Complex into what is now called the Campus Westend.

There was some debate as to what to call the Abrams Building now it no longer served the purpose for which it received that name. It was considered naming it for the architect, a guy named Poelzig. But it was finally decided to revert to the name "IG Farben House" as not ignoring the building's unpleasant past: IG Farben worked hand in glove with the Nazis, amongst other things producing the gas used in the concentration camps. In fact, the university has done much to expose its own Nazi past, and the new campus is dotted with memorials and information on the university's (sometimes inglorious) history.

I was reconnected with the ex-Abrams Building a few years after its closure when in 2000 Frankfurt University asked me to collaborate on creating a permanent exhibition on the building's history. I worked with a couple of historians who did the research and was responsible for the English version of the texts. The exhibition consists of 40 large wall panels, with illustrations and accompanying texts in German and English, mounted in groups of eight on five of the building's floors, the 2nd through the 6th. Eight of the panels are devoted to the US military era, starting in 1945 with the occupation of the building by Eisenhower and his staff, who organized the immediate postwar administration of the American zone from that location, and ending with Operation Move Victory, when V. Corps moved to Heidelberg. The Eisenhower Room – his former office – is preserved in its original state on the second floor.

The exhibition features a section on the psychiatric hospital built on the site in the 19th century – a very progressive institution for its time run by a Dr. Hoffmann (also famous for

his children's books) who practiced what was later called occupational therapy. The fact that the Abrams Building was built on the site of a former lunatic asylum was naturally cause for mirth among certain of its denizens. The twelve central panels tell the story of IG Farben during the Nazi period and are strategically located for all to see on the exhibition's bottom floor.

I still have a souvenir from the Frankfurt Ed. Center, which was given me by the field reps when offices were being cleared out in 1994: a magnificent flag of the State of Maryland measuring 6 by 4.5 feet. Even as a kid in the 1950's in England, when for a time "flags of the world" was my hobby, I considered Maryland's colorful banner with its intricate geometry to be the most attractive among the 50 state flags. Not sure that it qualifies as archival material but having looked after it for a quarter of a century, I'd be willing to pass it on.