a complete standstill. In 1987, the German architectural magazine *Baumeister* resumed the enduring dispute:

> The critical area of development is naturally near the Wall, and has remained in planning limbo for three decades. A cultural center has gradually arisen since the fifties, and master plans for the general development have been created: Scharoun presented his in 1964. His design was suddenly replaced in 1983 by Hans Hollein's controversial master plan – a decorative concept which has subsequently been discussed, criticized and repeatedly postponed. All questions are still unsettled at the moment. (*Baumeister* 6 (1987): 33)

German reunification once again turned the urban location upside down. The Kulturforum was suddenly no longer merely a symbolically central theme; the neighboring Potsdamer Platz, with its rapidly growing urban crown, literally eclipsed the buildings of the Kulturforum. The wasteland between the singular individual structures, dominated by their formal components, posed a challenge to the revitalization of the square. Because most of the main attractions faced their entrances away from the *piazzetta*, as the ramp-like sloping square in front of the museums was wistfully conceived, the forum remained lifeless. In 1998 the horticultural project aiming at an open center failed in its claim to be a public place of contemplation, hindered by its location partly next to an urban freeway. In 2004–2005, a discussion that is important for today's development generated interest in the site among a broad professional public and identified the public demand for a return to a mixture of functions, a conglomerate order as a structural principle interlocking enclosed and free space.

Numerous architectural paths of re-urbanization played out. However, the lack of results in the endless planning decisions recently opened up a new chapter in the history of the failure of urban planning. In 2012, the city sought to counteract a decline in visitors and abandon the overall plan in favour of a rapid expansion of the National Gallery. In 2016, these subordinate additions to the existing buildings completely suppressed the space's significance as a square, reducing it to a gap between buildings. The blank will now be filled. With the allocation of the competition prize for the Museum des 20. Jahrhunderts to the oversized, formalized gabled-roof house designed by the partnership of Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron on the previously large open space, all of Scharoun's and Hollein's forum ideas have become superfluous in equal measure.

Your Flight Has Been Delayed

Max Hirsh

Among their European neighbors, German engineers are thought to be an efficient, parsimonious, law-abiding, and unfailingly detail-oriented lot. The 30-year saga of Berlin-Brandenburg Airport (BER) (**Figure 3**) — with its primary plot points of mismanagement, serial building code violations, and stratospheric cost overruns — flies in the face of those Teutonic stereotypes. What went wrong?

BER's woes can be traced back to the heady days after the fall of the Berlin Wall. As the realization set in that Berlin would once again become the capital of a united Germany, transport planners floated the idea of turning the city into the *Luftkreuz Europas*: an air hub not just for a reunited country, but for a reunited continent. Overcoming Berlin's fragmented aviation infrastructure — which remained divided between Tegel and Tempelhof airports in West Berlin and Schönefeld in the East — represented the first step toward realizing that vision. In January 1990, the East German transport minister, Heinrich Scholz, proposed the construction of a new airport whose physical scale and cutting-edge design would testify to Berlin's incipient role as the capital of Europe. Like any good socialist *Funktionär*, Scholz envisioned two five-year plans: one for master planning

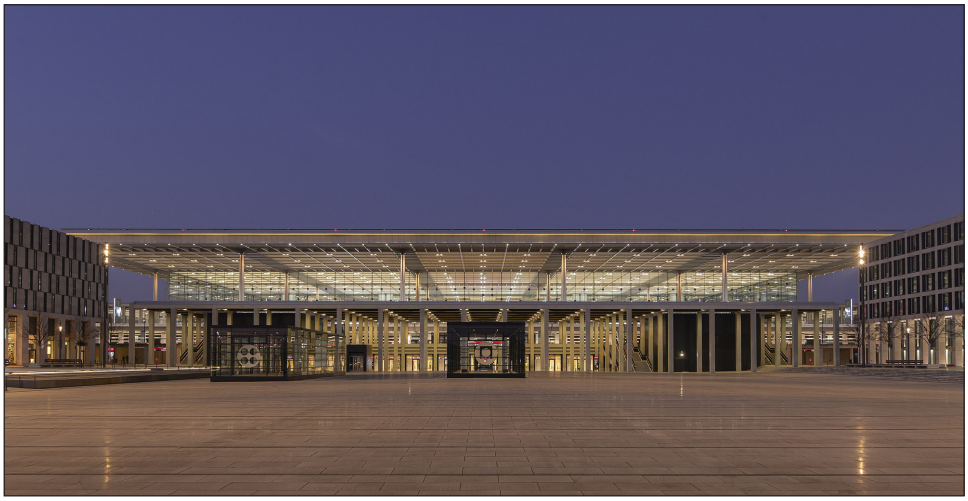

Figure 3: Exterior view of Berlin Brandenburg Terminal 1, 2020. Photo: Arne Müseler, arne-mueseler.com. CC-BY-SA-3.0. https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/de/deed.de.

and another for construction. By the year 2000, Berlin would wow its visitors with an awe-inspiring megahub, rivaling the likes of Heathrow, Charles de Gaulle, and O'Hare.

The planning for BER began soon thereafter, culminating in 1996 with the selection of a site in Brandenburg, the flat, sparsely populated province surrounding Berlin. As a teenage transport nerd, I absorbed every news item that I could find about the new airport. Would it be connected to Germany's high-speed rail system? Would it become the new hub for Lufthansa, the national airline? And would the airport be ready in time for the 2000 Olympic Games, which local politicians were keen on bringing to Berlin?

None of those things came to pass. As crucial decisions about the airport were repeatedly delayed, it became clear that BER faced many challenges. In a city that remained physically and culturally divided into two distinct halves, local politics played a big role. From the get-go, BER's advocates pushed to close Tegel. From a planning perspective, that made sense: borne of Cold War necessity during the 1948 Berlin Airlift, Tegel is adjacent to some of West Berlin's most densely populated neighborhoods. Thousands of people live under its flight paths. Removing the airport would improve their quality of life and open up new areas for redevelopment. Yet Tegel also holds a special position in the heart of anyone who grew up in West Berlin. In a city surrounded by barbed wire, the airport was the gateway to the world: an emblem of Berliners' determination to remain connected to the free-wheeling culture and material abundance of the West, despite their isolation behind the Iron Curtain. More than three decades after the fall of the Wall, Tegel remains a powerful symbol of West Berlin culture, and an aesthetic time capsule that evokes considerable emotional attachment.

Designed between 1965 and 1975 by the architects Meinhard von Gerkan and Volkwin Marg (GMP), the airport narrates the transition from modernism to postmodernism, juxtaposing the functional ambitions of the former with the tone-deaf playfulness of the latter. Tegel's iconic hexagonal terminal was designed around the needs of the car: the terminal's forecourt is lined with a narrow strip of parking spaces, allowing passengers to literally drive to their departure gate and proceed directly to the airbridges extending from the hexagon's exterior. That concept proved to be short-lived: as air travel became a mass-market phenomenon, Tegel struggled to cope with the attendant increase in passengers. Yet what GMP lacked in terms of an operational vision of future aviation needs, they compensated for by ushering West Berliners into the aesthetics of postmodernism, extricating the walled city from the geometric rigidity and restrained palette of midcentury modernism. Gigantic numbers and technicolor arrows line the walls of the terminal's approach road, as if a children's book illustrator had been tasked with designing its wayfinding system. The terminal's hexagonal structure is echoed in six-sided motifs throughout the airport: hexagonal wall and floor tiles, hexagonal insulation panels, even hexagonal seating arrangements, all executed in the preferred color scheme (ochre, orange, olive) of the 1970s Bundesrepublik.

Despite Tegel's limitations, many Berliners rejected BER, at times championing scrappy Tegel's ability to persevere even as its infrastructure became hopelessly dated. Their lack of enthusiasm trickled up to elected officials, contributing to a distinct lack of momentum surrounding the new airport. That torpor was exacerbated by rivalries between three parochial elites, each of whom had a vested interest — or rather disinterest — in BER: one in Berlin; another in Potsdam, the capital of Brandenburg; and yet another in Bonn, the former seat of West Germany's government. Although Bonn's influence has waned since reunification, its armada of civil servants still controls the federal purse strings. Moreover, the West German political class — which flew in and out of Tegel every week — strongly favored the existing airport, just a short taxi ride away from the government quarter. For politicians, the prospect of trekking out to Brandenburg did not exactly spark joy. Nor did BER win the affection of Brandenburgers who, since time immemorial, have kept their weird big-city neighbors at a generous arm's length. While some welcomed the prospect of job opportunities, many feared an increase in congestion and pollution and — perhaps most threateningly of all — an influx of Berliners.

None of these ingredients proved to be those of a recipe for success. By the early 2000s, Berlin had been redeveloped beyond recognition: the Wall was gone, and what appeared to be the entire population of Swabia was busy remodeling thousands of flats in formerly working-class neighborhoods. By contrast, Berlin's aviation infrastructure had barely changed. Schönefeld still served budget travelers en route to Mallorca and Anatolia. Tempelhof still felt impossibly oversized, accommodating a handful of flights inside the cavernous brainchild of Albert Speer. And poor Tegel remained stuck in the '70s: a disco symphony of earth tones, punctuated by those funky hexagons.

Meanwhile, BER was nowhere near completion: in fact, it only broke ground in 2006. The airport's setbacks stemmed from incompetence, unrealistic ambitions, and a lack of oversight, all rooted in the insular mentality of Berlin's administrative class. Small-town politics were likewise manifested in BER's architectural, engineering, and managerial choices. In a big whopping surprise, the airport authority selected GMP as BER's lead architect: the same firm that designed Tegel and that also planned Berlin's new central train station. Local construction firms with little experience in large infrastructure projects were hired to supervise complex feats of engineering. The airport's management board consisted of well-connected local heroes with scant knowledge of the aviation business. Meanwhile, village administrators from Brandenburg were tasked with issuing permits and enforcing regulations. Anticipating more headaches than benefits from BER, they relished any opportunity to identify violations that might delay the project. In one infamous example, 1,700 linden trees were planted at the airport, only to then be removed when officials uncovered an inconsistency between the subspecies of linden designated in the contract and the one that had actually been planted in the ground.

As for the airport's design, BER is an exercise in too little, too late: actualizing the infrastructural ambitions of a bygone era. Toward the end of the 20th century, gargantuan greenfield airports located far from the city center were all the rage: witness Milan's Malpensa and Montréal's Mirabel, both of which emerged in the middle of nowhere, much to the regret of future traffic planners. Nowadays such greenfield projects are limited to cities with rapidly growing populations and to countries where authoritarian leaders leverage megaprojects to distract from ineffective governance. Neither of those attributes characterize Berlin: its population remains below pre-war levels and, that population having lived through a few too many authoritarian regimes, the appetite for grandiose construction projects remains muted.

On an aesthetic level, BER articulates the enlightened gravitas favored by Germany's public-sector clients. GMP were a safe choice — the devil you know — and that risk-averse approach pervades the airport's architectural moves, which are about as ambitious as the late-career bureaucrats who sponsored them. Solid, sober, and obsequiously inconspicuous, the terminal feels very much like a 'safe space' for civil servants: an understated aesthetic that one journalist dubbed a 'tragedy in nut brown'. Sandstone floor tiles, wood paneling, and an unwavering loyalty to the good ol' rectangle — no hexagons here! — give travelers the impression that they are entering, say, the Brandenburg Ministry of Weights and Measures.

On Halloween 2020 — a fitting date, perhaps — BER opened and a week later Tegel closed. Readers will excuse my agnosticism: after so many postponed inaugurations, it was difficult to muster much faith. In essence, BER is an airport that has fallen both out of place and out of time. The sense of a project that has shown up too late to the party is compounded by BER's début in the midst of a global pandemic, at the tail end of what has been one of the most challenging years in the history of aviation. It evinces the parochial ambitions of a landlocked dictatorship that recently got wind of late-20th-century infrastructure fads. And snubbed by Lufthansa (no love is lost between Berlin and Germany's national carrier, which favors Frankfurt and Munich), BER remains an airport hub without a hub airline. Schiphol has KLM, Charles de Gaulle has Air France, Heathrow has BA. And BER? For the German capital's new airport, the closest thing to an anchor tenant is Easyjet, the British budget airline that is tottering on the edge of bankruptcy.

Berlin's intellectuals relish the opportunity both to dissect the failings of their leaders and to construct a narrative of cultural decline indicative of broader afflictions to the German soul. On both counts, BER hasn't disappointed: for decades, discussing BER has amounted to a never-ending self-criticism session, repeated a thousand times in print and over the dinner table. The airport also serves as a go-to topic for small talk: where the English discuss the weather to convert strangers into acquaintances, Berliners turn to BER. Among aviation planners, BER's record of botched openings has become somewhat of a running joke. Yet those who know Berlin can't deny that the airport pretty accurately reflects the city's cultural peculiarities, particularly its relaxed attitude to industriousness and punctuality. In stark contrast to the rest of their countrymen, Berliners are a *Volk* inured to delays and disappointments. BER is a fitting emblem of the city that it serves: always pushing the boundaries of what it means to be fashionably late, and with an inimitable knack for avoiding strenuous activity, in the end Berlin still somehow manages to get the job done, sort of. Will the new airport be a success? As the Berliner says, *mal kieken*.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

How to cite this article: Sölch, B, Nagel, E and Hirsh, M. 2021. Reviews of the Built Environment. *Architectural Histories,* 9(1): 7, pp. 1–7. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5334/ah.578

Published: 10 May 2021