



ICC BERLIN HIGH-TECH ARCHITECTURE FOR WEST BERLIN

Constructed between 1973 and 1979 on behalf of the federal state of Berlin, the International Congress Centre Berlin (ICC) quickly became a world-renowned landmark of the city. The architectural competition was already announced in 1965. The original idea was to construct several new trade fair pavilions and a congress building. The design submitted by Ursulina Schüler-Witte and Ralf Schüler won first place in the competition. However, due to the lack of funds in the federal state of Berlin, the work was only begun in 1973 with the construction of the multi-storey car park, before the construction of the main building began in 1975.

It was 320 metres long, 80 metres wide and 40 metres high, making it one of the largest buildings in West Berlin. During the Cold War era, the ICC had a major impact on the image of the divided city as a modern, open and free cosmopolitan city, a shop window of the West. Until its closure in 2014 it was one of the most modern congress centres in the world, and in 80 different rooms it offered space for up to 20,000

participants at congresses and other events. Situated in direct proximity to Berlin's trade fair complex, the shining silver building extends along a plot next to the urban motorway. Anyone driving into Berlin from the south-west is welcomed by three major landmarks which have been there for half a century: the AVUS complex, the radio tower and the ICC. The ICC has been a listed building since 2019 because it was seen as the most important monument of high-tech architecture in Germany and one of the most significant buildings of post-war architecture. A special feature is the authentic state of preservation of the building. Both externally and internally, the extraordinary forms, colours and materials of the ICC are fully preserved and visible.



TESTIMONY TO TECHNICAL OPTIMISM

After a construction period of only four years, the ICC quickly established itself as one of the largest and most modern congress centres in the world. One reason was its outstanding and consistent technological character. Even today, it still conveys the charm of a period of technological optimism. The location on an insular site surrounded by extremely busy roads meant that the whole of the interior had to be thoroughly isolated from any sound-bearing connection to the subsoil and the exterior surface of the building. It was important to ensure that noise and vibrations from the outside could not be felt in the everyday congress proceedings. The response to this planning requirement was a structure based on the "building-in-a-building" principle. There is an inner building which is enclosed in an independently constructed and thus separate outer shell.

The "interior building" consists of a complex load-bearing structure of reinforced concrete with pre-tensioned transverse divider elements as the main supports. They combine the overall loads of the "interior building" and transfer them down to the foundations. Neoprene bearings are used to ensure technical separation from exterior sounds and vibrations. The "exterior building" consists of the roof and exterior walls, which are constructed with a steel load-bearing structure. The enormous trussed girders which bear the loads can be clearly seen in the exterior of the building.



ARRIVING IN THE ICC LEVEL 0

In keeping with the ideal of a city adapted for motorised travel in the 1960s and 1970s, the building is closely integrated into Berlin's traffic system. This especially applies to visitors arriving by car. The building has its own multi-storey car park and a "car foyer" in the form of a drive-in level which allows cars to arrive immediately below the main entrance.

The main entrance of the congress centre is situated at the end of the building facing Neue Kantstrasse. After the visitor passes through the entrance area, the first area is Level 0, an enormous reception and distribution hall. It is also referred to as the boulevard level. The broad central aisle is flanked by two lower side corridors which lead to the cloakroom counters and sanitary rooms. The first point of call for visitors is the service and information counter which is situated at the centre of the main aisle. Several staircases and escalators, arranged like side roads, lead from the central boulevard to the other levels of the building. The routes to the levels are symmetrically duplicated. Level 0 is like a traffic hub with its own "road system" for visitors. However, it offers not only movement routes and guidance through the building, it also contains several seating areas to enable visitors to settle in the building or communicate in groups.



LIGHTING ART AS A GUIDANCE SYSTEM

In the entrance area, visitors are welcomed by electronic panels which can display customised texts and are flanked by neon strip lighting. On arrival in the foyer, the visitor immediately notices the red and blue neon strip lighting. This is part of the information and guidance system designed by the Berlin-based lighting artist Frank Oehring in collaboration with the architect Helge Sypereck. It goes hand in hand with the structure of the ICC because the guidance system was designed at the same time as the planning of the building. With its two colours (red on the left, blue on the right) it quickly and intuitively helps visitors to find their way around the building.

The central feature of the illuminated guidance system is the light sculpture at the heart of the building to which the artist gave the title "The Brain". It is 9.50 metres tall and spans three levels in the building. If we look closely we can see the "brain slices" from which electronic strip lights rise like nerve fibres. They lead to the nearby ICC control room from which all electronic control signals are sent out for the whole building.

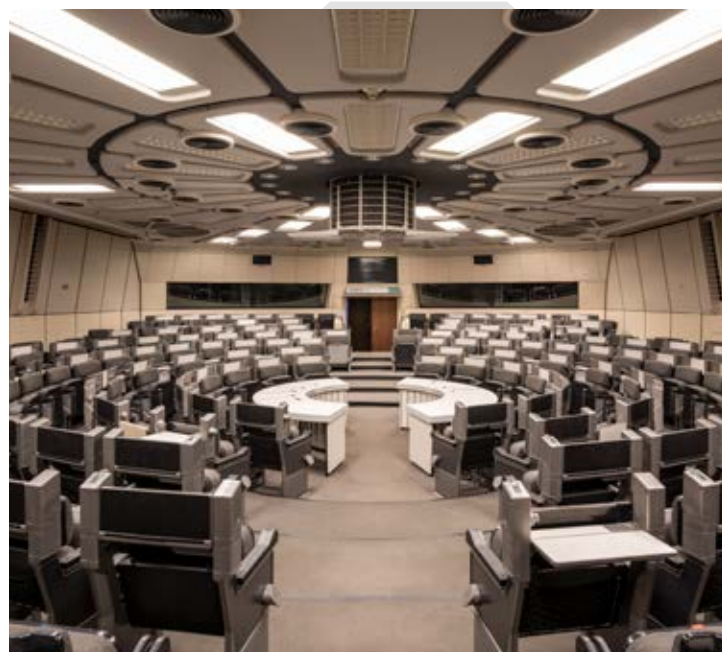


COMMUNICATION HUB LEVELS 1 AND 2

Level 1 is characterised by a spacious open foyer which is flanked by bars. Various escalators and staircases lead up to Level 2, which is the foyer level. Here, too, the focus is on communication. This is encouraged by seating which mainly consists of groups of four chairs around a low table. The upper part of the multi-storey light sculpture forms the core of the central foyer. The connections from the side foyers to the central area, and thus to the central congress rooms, are designed as bridges which underline the open atmosphere of the building. The planners aimed to achieve the greatest possible transparency as a context for all kinds of communication. The access area is therefore designed as a spacious and open movement area.

A carpet woven to the architects' design covers the floor in both levels. Its grey-brown circular pattern is now regarded as a "retro-chic" style. Together with the mint-green ceiling elements, dark green rounded plant tubs, metal railings and solid concrete support pillars, this creates the effect of an overall work of art in the style of the 1970s with finely tuned details.

Although the ICC won accolades as the best congress centre in the world almost every year while it was in use, and although it also successfully featured as an event and concert location, the building was eventually closed in 2014. Since then it has been in standstill operation. There were several temporary uses, for example as refugee accommodation, as a Corona vaccination centre, as the venue of the art festival "The Sun Machine Is Coming Down" or the conference Q-Berlin. In 2023 the listed building has successfully been made accessible for the Open Heritage Day. The goal of giving the ICC back to the people of Berlin and finding a sustainable new use is also supported by the Berlin Senate. After an expression of interest process in 2019, it has now been decided to implement a concept assignment for the continued use of the ICC, and this process is currently being prepared by the Senate Department for Economics, Energy and Enterprises. The goal is to develop a modern centre for art, culture and for creative and innovative business practices, with flexible spaces which can also be used for congresses and conferences when the need arises.



BRIDGE OF A SPACESHIP ROOM 6

Why did the people of Berlin give the ICC its nickname, the "Spaceship"? The reason is not only found in the external form of the building, but also in many places inside the building. For example in Room 6, which is also described as the bridge of the spaceship. The reason for this name can be seen immediately. This central room with its low ceiling, its circular form and its sloping walls is reminiscent of a spaceship capsule. This detail shows that the ICC is firmly rooted in the popular culture of the time. The room is rather like the interior of the space probe in the German TV series "Space Patrol – the Fantastic Adventures of the Spaceship Orion", which was broadcast in 1966, and it reflects the popularity of the spaceship theme in the 1960s and 1970s. The congress seats are concentrically arranged around central semi-circular tables, so Room 6 was ideally suited to small conferences which focussed on discussion. The room also has a technical ceiling which reveals the loudspeakers, spotlights and ventilation shafts which are necessary in the windowless room.



BIG, BIGGER, ROOM 1

The ICC has a total of 12,000m² of floor space with about 80 rooms which offer space for a combined capacity of 20,000 persons. The largest such space is Room 1. It can accommodate 5000 persons – and it was the first conference room of this size built in Germany. But that is not the only reason why this room can be called a spatial miracle. It also had partition walls which could be folded down to achieve flexible variations in the size of the room. In addition to the horizontal sub-division into the stall seats and the balcony, selected zones in the balcony could also be sub-divided by elements which could be let down from the ceiling. But the greatest possible variation, which is both technically and structurally fascinating, can be implemented between Room 1 and Room 2. They are situated opposite each other and are separated by a stage structure. This stage can be raised or lowered as needed. When it is raised, this creates an enormous auditorium which provides space for an extra audience of several thousand. The technical ceiling contains spherical loudspeakers, spotlights and strip lights which can be lowered. The booths for simultaneous interpreting are integrated around the ceiling.

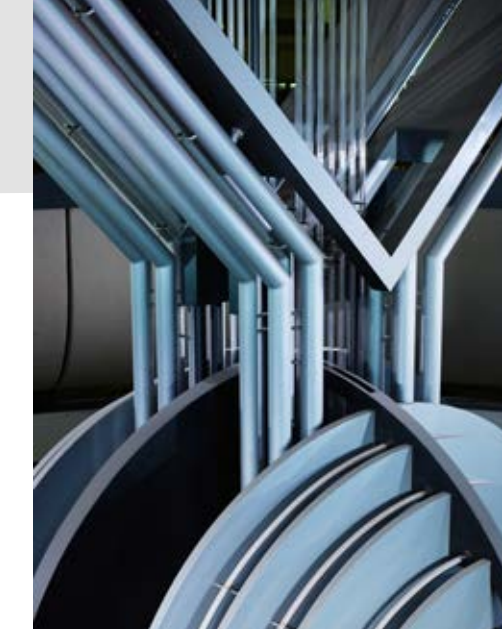
TAKE YOUR SEAT CONGRESS CHAIRS

As part of the creation of an overall work of art, the congress chairs were also especially designed for the ICC by Ralf Schüler. The architect himself described the patented congress armchair, of which thousands were installed in the ICC, as the "home base". They were thought out down to the last detail and customised for use at congresses. Each of the extremely comfortable armchairs has a fold-out table fixed to the backrest and fitted with additional technical elements. These include an individually adjustable table lamp, loudspeakers with volume controls and an operating panel for the interpreting system, which can be adjusted to any of eight different languages. The armrests of the congress chairs are fitted with headphones and a "request to speak" button with a signal lamp. Drinking glass holders and ashtrays were also necessary fittings to complete the "home base" in the spirit of the 1970s.



RISING ABOVE IT ALL THE ROOF TERRACE

The ICC Berlin is a highly technological congress machine which surpasses all superlatives. The crowning feature of the building is the roof terrace. With a roof garden foyer and fully equipped counter before visitors enter the roof terrace, this highest level of the building is ideally suited for receptions of all kinds. The opportunity to go out into the open air and enjoy a panoramic view over the roofs of Berlin from the roof terrace was a highlight then, and it still holds this attraction today. Visitors on the terrace can see how closely the three-storey bridge links the ICC with the buildings of the trade fair complex, especially the three exhibition halls which form part of the ICC. The direct connection to the urban motorway is also clearly visible. Together with the radio tower, the ICC became internationally known as a symbol of the trade fair location and the city of Berlin, and it has featured on hundreds of postcard photographs. The link between the trade fair complex and the congress centre in Berlin was an effective locational advantage and the first such combination in Germany.



ICC BERLIN A SPACESHIP FOR THE FUTURE

„Berlin has every reason to look to the future with great optimism. With the International Congress Centre Berlin, we have taken a bold step into the future [...]. With the new International Congress Centre we can present Berlin even more convincingly as a meeting place for the world. From our painful everyday experience we know very well what borders mean. We want to help to overcome them by means of communication and exchange.“

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