

EXCLUSIVE

Text by **FLORIAN MAAR**
Publicity photos

MASTER ARCHITECT, NOT STARCHITECT

After several decades, world-famous architect Meinhard von Gerkan has finally found the home of his birth in Jūrmala, Latvia. In an exclusive interview with *Baltic Outlook*, he speaks about his sense of belonging and about the most significant accomplishments of his illustrious career.

The first thing that you notice when you talk to Meinhard von Gerkan is his Baltic German accent. Born to a Baltic German family in Riga in 1935, the renowned architect recently celebrated his 80th birthday. In 1939, he and his family left Latvia, but he lost both his father and his mother during the coming years and was subsequently raised by foster parents.

As one of the world's most influential and busiest architects, Meinhard von Gerkan has designed hundreds of buildings, from an ornithological station to airports. These include Berlin's central train station and a whole Chinese city for one million people. His 550-employee-strong global architectural practice *gmp* (*Architekten von Gerkan, Marg und Partner*), which von Gerkan founded 50 years ago together with Volkwin Marg, has been involved in projects in numerous countries.

The company won the International Architecture Award in 2012 and Germany's *A&W Architect of the Year* award in 2014. Nevertheless, rather than a "starchitect" like Rem Koolhaas or Norman Foster, von Gerkan prefers to be seen as an old-school *Baumeister*, or pragmatic builder.

"Strive for the best of simplicity" is *gmp's* credo. Aside from designing notable buildings, von Gerkan also teaches. After heading the department of architecture design at the Brunswick University of Technology, he founded the Academy for Architectural Culture near his company's head office in Hamburg. I meet with von Gerkan there, at *gmp's* headquarters, in his office overlooking the Hamburg harbour.

What is the main task of an architect?

To build and create a human habitat for society, considering the social, topographical, cultural and historical conditions at each building site. A human habitat also includes the space between buildings. In terms of urban planning, the main task is to find a balance between the main conflicting components, which are vehicular traffic with its accompanying noise and pollution, and city dwellers' need for liveable spaces.

Which places do you like best for their urban character?

Italian Renaissance cities like Siena and Bern in Switzerland, which have preserved their character and identity. The buildings have been made on a good scale and some road surfaces are still original, not asphalted over. The public places are filled with life. The elderly sit in front of their houses, while children play in the streets. Cities are like living organisms. They are the result of a common understanding about how to form an environment to live in. In the cities I mentioned and in southern France, they have managed to keep car traffic out of the historical centres and recapture certain urban spaces for the use of pedestrians.

Do you think that Riga has been providing a good example by introducing bicycle-friendly streets?

Yes, absolutely. You can see the positive effect of bicycle-friendliness in a lot of places. Less car traffic means a better quality of life. Take the example of some cities in Scandinavia.

What has changed in the half century that you've been working as an architect?

For a long time, architecture represented a collective attempt to balance rationality and aesthetics, and it often succeeded. The goal of architecture was to create pleasant living and work environments. Nowadays,

the commercial and profit-seeking aspect dominates over all other considerations. The clients and building contractors have changed. For centuries, these were individuals with an attitude and a sense of taste. In this time of globalisation and change, building contractors have become more anonymous; they might be housing associations or big corporations acting as intermediaries for unknown future residents. As a result, the architect doesn't have any direct contact with the future homeowner. He has to rely on the traditions, conventions, preferred building materials and building history of the region as a surrogate for the unknown preferences of the house resident.

Is architecture disdained today?

Yes, I fear so.

Would you have preferred to be an architect during the Renaissance in Italy?

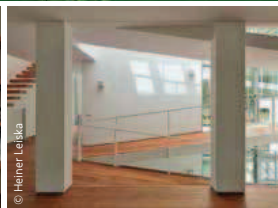
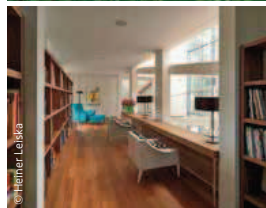
No, that's far from what I do. I would choose to be an architect in the Bauhaus era in the 1920s in Germany.

You set a nice example of Bauhaus-inspired architecture with the Villa Guna in Jūrmala, Latvia.

The design was a gift to my friends Guna Eglīte and Leons Jakrins. The odd construction form resulted from the small size of the estate. The trees had to remain where they were and I wanted a symbiosis between the house and nature, a dialogue. The cubic structure was inspired by the classical white villa style of the Bauhaus movement. The tower provides a connection with the Baltic Sea, as otherwise you wouldn't be able to see the coastline.

Baltic Outlook asked Guna Eglīte how it feels to live in the villa.

"What I like most about my house is its amazing atmosphere. Thanks to the panoramic roof terrace, there is light and sun everywhere. The house has a very strong personality, like an artwork. The contrasts



Villa Guna, Jūrmala, Latvia

I finally found my family's house in Jūrmala. I project a longing for home onto that house

of the villa's plastic forms impose effects in every part of the house and arouse emotions. The house is an admirable performance of forms held together by light. Everything was designed perfectly to create this feeling."

You once said that the structure of architecture resembles music. What music is Riga like?

The sound of Riga would be melancholic, quiet and moderate. Think of Brahms.

What are your earliest memories of Riga?

I remember sliding along the ice of the city canal and sledging down Bastejkalns. And I remember playing at a timber house in Jūrmala. Apart from that, Riga is associated with diffuse and happy memories. Diffuse in the sense that I left at an age when the brain only starts to form lasting memories.

What does Riga mean to you?

Riga evokes a sense of being home. We had to leave the city when I was four years old. My father died during the Second World War and my mother died shortly after. I don't have any siblings and lost contact with all of my relatives in Riga, so for most of my life the connection to the city was completely cut. As a result of the Hitler-Stalin treaty [Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 1939, ed.], we all had to leave our Baltic home.

Hitler wanted us to settle in Warthegau, the region around what is now Poznań in Poland. Most of our relatives stayed there and I didn't see them again until 1989. My mother wanted us to move on, but she died, so I grew up near Bremen and later in Hamburg. Now Riga is connected to newfound friends such as Leons Jakrins and Guna Eglīte and the work that I have done together with them.

Are you also trying to re-establish a connection with your parents, whom you lost so early in your lifetime?

I can only affirm that. Not only am I searching for them emotionally, but also physically in Riga. I finally found my family's house in Jūrmala. I project a longing for home onto that house. I will visit it soon.

Did growing up as an orphan influence your personality?

It's hard to say. I attended 12 different schools and had to roam around a lot at a young age. I missed living in a consolidated family home, even though friendly families took care of me and treated me like their own child. I had to start working at an early age, mostly in theatre and film.

Did these circumstances bring out any advantages, like being more willing to take risks and being more adventurous?

Well, many people would attribute those characteristics to me. Thinking about it, that might be the reason why I have turned out this way.

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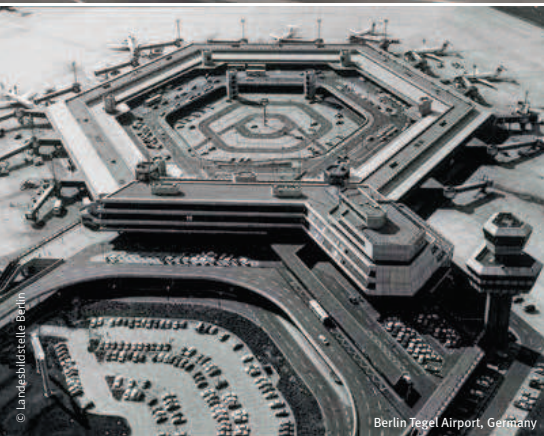
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Berlin Brandenburg Airport, Germany



Berlin Tegel Airport, Germany



Citadeles Moduļi, Riga, Latvia

How do you like Riga's cityscape?

Luckily, during the socialist times there was no money to change the city's character. It's a pleasant city to look at. I appreciate the harmonious, human scale of the centre, with the canal and green belt around the Old Town, interspersed parks and clear structure of the streets and houses. All this creates a very pleasant ambience. New buildings have to fit in, a process that seems to have gone smoothly in the centre.

You set an example with *Citadeles Moduļi*.

The task was to integrate a multi-storey car park, which I covered with a building. It was important to stay within the scale of the neighbourhood. The colours of the vertical lamellar blinds are inspired by the colours of autumn birch foliage. I think that we succeeded and I'm happy with the result.

Which of your buildings should stand the test of time, let's say for another 200 years?

More than one, I hope. The airports and train stations, for example, as they are like monuments that testify to the technical progress and state of society. Let's take Berlin's central station, at least with the desired additions [after losing to von Gerkan in court, the Deutsche Bahn has to change the building's rooftop structure – ed.], and the just-completed Vietnamese parliament building. That edifice will hopefully boost democracy, as it was built to serve as the seat of a democratic institution.

Berlin Tegel is widely seen as the perfect airport, with its hexagonal main terminal and its drive-in character, which allows for paths as short as 30 metres from the plane to the terminal exit. Why can't one build airports like that anymore?

There are two reasons. The first is security. By the time the construction of the hexagonal terminal complex was completed [in 1974 – ed.], the first terrorist hijackings had already taken place. An even more important consideration is non-aviation commerce. Airports have turned into huge shopping malls with small check-in points. I tried hard to prevent Hamburg's airport from turning into a shopping plaza, but without success. Why do you need to offer 500 different perfumes at an airport? Bottled perfume is small and expensive. When Tegel was built, there was a kiosk, a souvenir shop and a flower shop, and that's it.

The chair that you designed for the VIP lounge at Tegel was a star at last month's *Salone del Mobile* in Milan, 40 years after you designed it. Did this late claim to fame come as a surprise to you?

Not at all! Already when I designed the chair, I was sure that it would become a classic. I absolutely don't understand why the airport later replaced these chairs with cheaper "modern" furniture. I have always designed furniture.

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Outlook **INTERVIEW**



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Hanoi Museum, Vietnam

I have learned that I can accomplish more when I am more restrained during disputes

What about Berlin Brandenburg Airport? Your company designed its U-shaped terminal building. Will you be proud of the airport when it finally opens?
Absolutely! It's really an amazing airport.

Why has it taken so long to get the airport in operation?
Ah, that's mostly due to a rivalry between the two companies that are installing the fire protection system.

What's the problem with those huge public building projects, anyway? Is it amateurs (i.e. politicians) having to deal with hard-boiled professionals?
Not in the way that one might think, of one side trying to outwit the other. It's rather the context. In huge projects, the number of regulations multiplies with the complexity of the task at hand. Politicians are in office for four years, so they want to show off a fast and cheap success. That provokes unrealistic proposals to win the bidding and a jump-start of the implementation, when it is still impossible to seriously predict all costs.

So everybody knows already from the start that it's all just a bluff, a game?
...and everybody keeps playing the game.

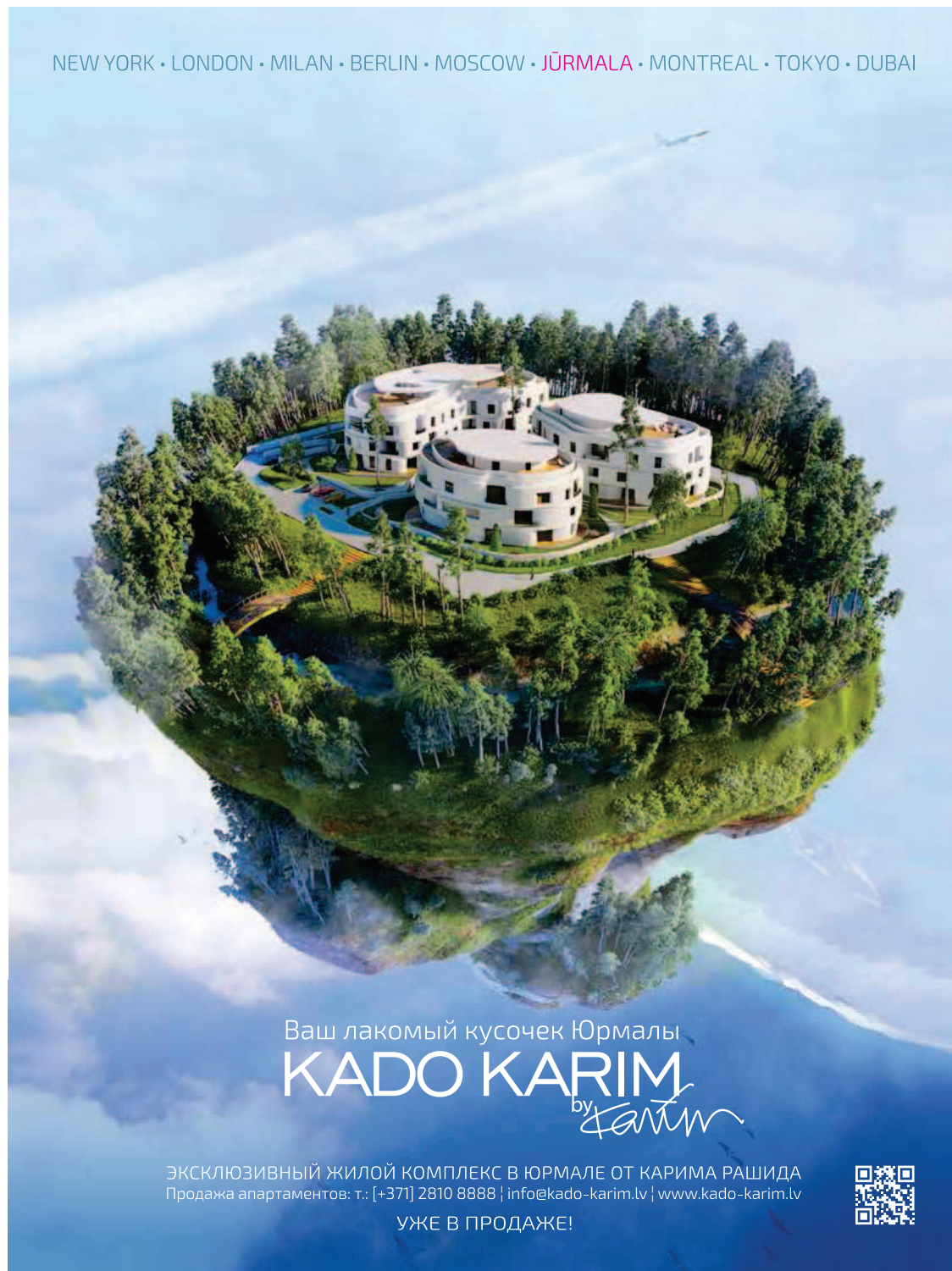
Is it easier for you to work in China?
Well, in that respect, yes, and you have to deal less with worriers.

What about the mentality? What have you learned in your cultural discourse?
I appreciate the serenity, the will for compromise, that everybody can maintain face in disputes, that dignity is important in communication. Yes, this has strongly influenced me. I have learned that I can accomplish more when I am more restrained during disputes.

How would you describe the urban character of Lingang, the city of 1.3 million residents that you designed? Are you happy with the way it has developed?
I'm absolutely happy about my idea to have an artificial lake and a promenade in the centre. People go for walks and do all kinds of sports there. Other aspects have developed in a less favourable way. The streets are much too wide to create a pleasant urban atmosphere, resulting in a lack of secrecy and intimacy.

Public projects have brought you close to decision-makers. One of them is former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder. His interior minister, Otto Schily, was

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Maritime Museum, Lingang New City, China

already a friend of yours when you studied at university. Would you like to share a story with us?

I remember one night at the *Kanzleramt* when the three of us emptied seven – or was it eight? – bottles of good red wine and talked about social developments, Berlin and the meaning of life.

Both Schröder and Schily are still working. You are 80 years old. Do you plan to retire?

No way! I couldn't even imagine that!

So you might vie for work at the Olympic

stadium in Hamburg, which is the German candidate city for 2024?

Of course. There will be a call for bids and we will compete for the contract. The Alster and Elbe rivers around Hamburg offer attractive and diverse surroundings with a high quality of living. And Hamburg as a city is as ambitious and competitive as the athletes in the Olympics.

What keeps you going after all these years?

The joy, the fun of creating, the recognition for a job well done, interesting conversations, aesthetic enjoyment and generating pleasure for others with my buildings. **BO**

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