

Frozen Art

An interview with German architect Meinhard von Gerkan

By GINTS GRUBE, Baltic Outlook, 2007

Meinhard von Gerkan was born in Riga to a family of Baltic Germans; he left Latvia at the beginning of World War II, along with the other Germans from the region. Today he is one of Germany's most renowned architects. His projects include the Tegel Airport in Berlin; the Tempodrome, also in Berlin, the Porsche Center in Leipzig; Berlin's Olympic Stadium; the Rimini Exhibition Center in Italy; China's National Museum, in Beijing; and the Grand Theater in Chongqing. Last year, von Gerkan completed work on his most recent large-scale project, Berlin's central station.

Currently, von Gerkan's office is working on the construction of a new city near Shanghai, China, for 800,000 residents. That's why the Germans call von Gerkan the "architect of modern China."

Baltic Outlook: Does the Baltic – German mentality and the fact that you are from Riga influence your job in any way?

Meinhard von Gerkan: When I give lectures or participate in discussions, people usually ask where I'm from. They can tell from my accent that I'm not from Germany. A few can guess that I'm from the Baltics. Though I only lived in Riga for the first four years of my life, this accent is still with me – reminding me that Riga is my birthplace.

Outlook: Do you remember your childhood in Riga?

Von Gerkan: No, only when I see photographs. But I remember how I would skate in winter on the canal. My grandfather was a German diplomat in Moscow, and my mother was born in Riga. My father was an engineer at the Siemens company. When Stalin and Hitler sold Latvia to the U.S.S.R., all the Germans had to leave. I was only four years old at the time.

Outlook: When did you first return to Riga?

Von Gerkan: During the Gorbachev period. I was visiting my godmother in Moscow, and so my wife and I traveled to Riga. Back then there was still lots of poverty, and we were followed everywhere. We lived in the big blue Hotel Latvija; the rooms had bedbugs. We were only permitted to walk in the park, and had to constantly look over our shoulders to see whether we were being followed. It was a strange atmosphere.

I have a photograph of me standing, holding a teddy bear, in front of a wooden house in Jurmala, where I was born, but I haven't been able to find the building. My cousin's father had a pharmacy in Jurmala, and we found that building a couple of years ago.

Outlook: Which art form is architecture closest to? Some have said that architecture is frozen music...

Von Gerkan: Others have said that architecture isn't art at all. I think that the laws that exist in music – rhythm, beats – are similar to those in architecture. Architecture has a certain structure and regularity, which forms a melody that fills the space in a structure or, if you want, a city. Architecture is somewhere between technology and art. Many things are very technical, and may be considered either right or wrong, but art can't have rights and wrongs; art is measured with ideas, creative impact, time, and the

influences of politics and society. To my mind, architecture is closer to sculpture; it is static, not mobile. A structure may change according to the light, shadows, or time of years, but overall it is static, frozen. Architecture is the only art form that doesn't exist autonomously; it is closely linked to society. We could live without music or painting, but we could never live without architecture.

Outlook: Why, out of all the art forms, does power most often choose architecture to manifest itself?

Von Gerkan: Because architecture is the only cultural form that may be seen by everyone; anyone may perceive it, accept it, or reject it. It is not necessary to listen to music; nobody needs to read books. Architecture is always present in society; that's why it becomes a medium through which people may be affected. For instance, when building giant stadiums, it is possible to bring about a feeling of unity in the masses. Or, in the American West, all the buildings are identical, but, nevertheless, everyone has his or her own home. On the one hand, this symbolizes individualization, but on the other, equality – everybody is the same. That's why I think architecture always represents a specific time period's social and power relations. Think about Rome, Egypt, the Aztecs – architecture gives us the opportunity to get to know these cultures.

Outlook: You once said that urban construction is a group production. What does this mean, group production?

Von Gerkan: To my mind, a city is a family, made up of individual homes. During the history of construction, the mutual relationship of individual elements made old cities, like those in Northern Italy, very harmonious. I feel this in the Art Nouveau buildings that were added to the historic buildings in Riga's Old City – a certain kinship.

Outlook: What about the House of Blackheads, in Old Riga, which was destroyed during the war and rebuilt in the late 1990s? Is this a part of the group production, too?

Von Gerkan: The House of Blackheads is a forgery – and one that's not even well-built. The Frauenkirche in Dresden, on the other hand, which was also rebuilt, is a restored original. The House of Blackheads gives a nice appearance of reality, but it is very far from historical authenticity. It's a superficial attraction for tourists, but it will never have an historical identity – the energy that is characteristic of historic structures. It will always be like a piece of wallpaper, superficial.

Outlook: Your first project was the Tegel Airport, in Berlin. Back then, Berlin was a divided city; but if you were to plan the project today, you'd have to take into account more than just political changes. You've said that modern-day airports differ very little from supermarkets.

Von Gerkan: Yes, and that's very unfortunate. You won't find any stores in the Tegel Airport, because there's no room for them there. Stores take up 20,000 square meters of the Berlin train station, but they don't dominate the airport. The airport is set up in such a way that the building itself dominates, not the stores. Lots of airports – Copenhagen, Amsterdam – look like malls, which I think is despicable.

Public buildings – like airports and railway stations – will always have an historical function; they will always represent a specific time period in the history of a society. Today, the city represents itself with malls, where one and the same things are sold, all over the world. There is no longer anything specific; there is a total lack of identity. This

is the interminable theme of globalization, which we come into contact with everywhere. The commercialization of public buildings begins with airports and stations. Now it has crossed over to museums, which are also slowly becoming stores. When you go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York, you feel as if you were in a book and souvenir shop. Lots of people don't even get past the gift shop. That's all thanks to the laws of commercial thinking: wherever we invest money, money has to be earned as well.

Outlook: You've built more than twenty buildings in China. Now you have an office in Beijing, and are currently working on the construction of a new city there. What is it that you can do in China but can't do in modern-day Germany?

Von Gerkan: We're building a city for 800,000 residents, to the south of Shanghai. It's a unique construction project, the first of its kind. The conditions are very open, and the creative aspects have been left to the planner; that's why we could develop the city's structure like a metaphoric idea, an image that we now use as an advertisement for the city. The idea is that the city was created from one drop. The drop crystallized in the clouds, fell into the water, and, with kinetic energy, formed rings in the water. These rings make up the city's structure.

A giant lake, with a radius of three kilometers, marks the center of the city. The lake is an empty space; there's nothing there, just water. People drive boats instead of cars, and have the wonderful opportunity to drive nine kilometers around the lake. This creates a marvelous symbiosis between living, working, and relaxation – water sports, swimming, and everything else the city offers for relaxation – while, at the same time, moving cars away from the city. The idea was to free up the city from the burden of cars, without taking them away from people. People can keep their cars, but cars are not allowed to dominate the city. I see this as a problem in Riga, where there are way too many cars everywhere.

Outlook: Is it easier for an architect to work in an authoritarian state than a democratic state?

Von Gerkan: On the one hand, it is much easier, because decisions are made much faster and long discussions aren't necessary in order to coordinate something. It's similar to the way decisions used to be made in monarchies. But on the other hand, there is a certain arbitrariness – that's why so many awful buildings are constructed; the people who order them don't always have good taste or an understanding of architecture.

Outlook: When you plan a house, do you also think about the building's death, about the fact that the house will someday be demolished?

Von Gerkan: That's a very good question. It's just like your own death: you reject any thought of it, though you know you should think about it. When a building is torn down, it creates lots of waste. If you know that a building has a limited life span, then you plan it in such a way that you'll be able to use the construction waste, recycle it. Steel can always be melted down and used again. The same holds true for glass, though to a lesser extent; but other materials can only be partially recycled. Construction with steel is more expensive than building with concrete; a larger workforce is needed, because

the buildings must be fire-safe. But it's much worse with buildings constructed of thick concrete, because lots of energy and resources are needed to tear them down. That's why an architect's task is not to think about how a building will be torn down in fifty years, but to think about a building's potential for use: how the building may be modified; how to give the building's structure a degree of elasticity, so that it can be adapted to both residential homes and offices, instead of having just one specific aim that can't be altered.

Outlook: But Berlin's central station, which you planned, is also built of steel and glass. Could this building be tarnished over time?

Von Gerkan: Every building grows old; the better a building ages, the better the building. Unfortunately, these days I'm forced, for technical reasons, to use materials that don't age well. When you stand by the baggage claim at an airport, you see all sorts of new plastic suitcases coming down the conveyer belt – models that change every couple of years – and they look like nothing special. But then you see some twenty-year-old, scratched-up leather suitcase, and it looks like a gem compared to all the other cases. Life has left its mark on it; it has its own unique character. The same should hold true for architecture.