

Kaufhaus Des Westens: a German State for over 100 Years

By Elizabeth Zeunert

History and Theory of Architecture Student, Carleton University

Kaufhaus des Westens has been a celebrated institution of consumerism in Berlin for over one hundred years. This luxury department store is the largest of its kind in continental Europe; an emblem of the “[historical tradition of] European urban department stores such as Galleries Lafayette in Paris, Selfridges in London or la Rinascente in Milan”.¹ Serving the German capital as more than simply a consumerist institution, *Kaufhaus des Westens* has grown simultaneously with Berlin, adapting its commercial space into a civic one. This idea is exemplified in *Kaufhaus Des Westens*’ stature as the only Berlin department store to survive 20th century Germany; having supported the retail infrastructure of Berlin since pre-war times with a rich history of its own. Affectionately nicknamed “KaDeWe” by Berliners, it is an emblem of Western consumerist ideals. This has caused KaDeWe to not only contribute to Berlin’s culture as a haven for consumerism, but also as a state centre for political ideas. KaDeWe is in a constant state of change, remodeling approximately every ten years. These renovations help KaDeWe to surpass its competitors by reflecting the societal needs of a city that is in a perpetual state of transformation. The history of KaDeWe demonstrates how the store has overcome the same challenges as Berlin and has kept in pace with the growth and transformation of this capital city. Hence, I will argue that *Kaufhaus Des Westens* is more than a simple shopping centre in Berlin; it exemplifies the evolution in consumer-

ism, culture and politics experienced by modern Germany.

This essay recounts the foundations of *Kaufhaus Des Westens*’ and its growth alongside Berlin from its construction in 1907 up to OMA’s current architectural proposal of reconstruction. First, I will challenge the controversies behind the initial construction of the department store building type, thereby examining KaDeWe’s success in early Weimar Republic period. Secondly, I will examine the changes made to KaDeWe compelled by the National Socialist Party’s anti-Semitic views. Thirdly, I will advocate that KaDeWe symbolized a new beginning following World War II, which awakened Berliner consumerism up until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Further along, I will conclude with the current rebirth of KaDeWe, in an era of new modernism. According to many scholars, department stores such as KaDeWe were “the pillars of early modern retail, acting as an incubator for sophisticated crafts, social exchange and challenging experimentation in services”.² It comes as no surprise that in the current era, with constant innovations in technology and the new social experience, KaDeWe’s original infrastructure no longer represents modern society. Yet again, this department store redefines itself once again to reflect the cultural views and consumerist needs of Berlin.

KaDeWe was built to be a luxury department

store, long before its umbrella company Arcandor, anointed KaDeWe as a “premium profile” status department store. Upon its opening KaDeWe, owned by a Jewish man named Adolf Jandorf, was known for hosting the latest Paris fashion shows and exotic fruits.³ The architecture of the building reflected the stylishness of the establishment. Originally spanning 24,000 square metres, the closed floor plan served as the norm in department store design until the post-modern shopping mall.⁴ Frederic Bedoire and Robert Tanner consider that KaDeWe’s “emphasized the structural aspect of [its] architecture”⁵ through its rough stones and small windows. This came to be perceived “in opposition to modernistic trends, but in close alliance with the increasingly national and traditional elements of the contemporary apartment building”.⁶ KaDeWe, built in a residential area, took inspiration from the surrounding apartment buildings. However, as its popularity increased, the cityscape around the store adapted. In 1910, Tauentzienstraße, a residential area, turned into the world-renowned shopping boulevard we know today.⁷

Furthermore, as explained by Sabine Hake “the astounding growth [of KaDeWe] during the Wilhelmine Empire had been fueled by the belated industrialization of Germany and the influx of large numbers of people from the impoverished eastern provinces”.⁸ An influx of people into the central core of Berlin resulted from the construction of the underground railway system. Before,

public transportation was limited to regular streetcars, a reliable yet comparatively slow system. Not only, was the *U-Bahn* faster, but it also stretched out into neighbourhoods outside of Berlin's metropolitan centre. Inaugurated officially in 1902, among Berlin U-Bahn's first stations was the *Wittenbergplatz*, coincidentally located across the future *Kaufhaus Des Westens*.⁹ One of the most overflowed stops along the underground railway's network, this popular station also increased the pedestrian traffic aboveground. Such innovations in transportation, made it easier for European citizens to travel in the span of a day from the Eastern provinces to the West. Hence, shopping became a more convenient activity, as it no longer required a full day with long periods of travel.

The industrial revolution also impacted the inside of KaDeWe through the invention of "a network of 150 cash desks connected to a central cashier's office via a pneumatic dispatch system".¹⁰ Cash literally floated around the store through its inner network of tubes connected to all of the departments.¹¹ Snickars compares KaDeWe's network of money-carrying tubes to the pneumatic-dispatch postal network of Berlin. This postal system commonly called *Berliner Rohrpost* was introduced in 1865, which over the years grew to ninety stations and four hundred kilometres of tubes, making it the second-largest pneumatic postal system, following the network in Paris.¹² This further evidence suggests that KaDeWe was in line with Berlin as it entered the industrial revolution. Accordingly, the symmetrical relationship between Berlin and its now iconic luxury department store can partially be explained by the advances in technology engendered by the industrial revolution.

Industrialization also meant a stronger and dynamic economy, which in turn meant more disposable

income for shopping. The industrial revolution of the Wilhelmine Period in Berlin fostered a welcoming environment for the newly opened *Kaufhaus Des Westens*, which influenced the store's future success. It becomes apparent that KaDeWe was related to the economy of Berlin, not only through direct transactions but also indirectly through the industrial revolution's impact on the German economy. Thus, we can conclude that in its initial construction, the architecture of KaDeWe was influenced by the surrounding area to integrate its colossal structure into the residential area, unifying the urban architecture.

After its first two decades of business, KaDeWe was incorporated into the infamous Hertie Group of department stores, owned by a man named Hermann Tietz.¹³ This incorporation brought with it an expansion and renovation of the store. The expansion heightened the popularity of the entire area, positively impacting consumerist traffic to KaDeWe and neighbouring stores. As Berlin's economy prospered, so did the success of KaDeWe, changing the surrounding area into a commercial marvel; KaDeWe's success was in direct synchronicity with Berlin's successful economy during the early Weimar Republic period.

Moving forward, not all socio-political events were conducive to the success of KaDeWe. It is important to examine the detrimental changes made to KaDeWe while the National Socialist Party's rise to power. To appreciate this point, we need to keep in mind the National Socialist Party materialized its anti-Semitic views through various legislation promoting hatred against Jewish business owners. The initial owner of KaDeWe, Adolf Jandorf was a Jewish man, as were the new owners from the Tietz Group. Accordingly, new laws were implemented to hinder the success of the Jewish

owned and operated retail spaces, and especially such renowned ones.

Importantly, in 1933, the law for the Protection of the Retail Trade banned retail chain stores and prohibiting existing businesses from adding new lines of merchandise. This law targeted department stores with the idea of combatting expansive capitalism; however, it was a thinly veiled tactic to prevent Jewish department store owners (of whom there were many) from succeeding.¹⁴ Consequently, in 1933, under the implementation of this law, the Hertie group was left with no choice but to sale to non-Jewish owners, who received an eleven million dollar loan from the Reich Ministry for Trade and Commerce upon appointing an "Aryan" managing director: a man named Georg Karg.¹⁵ The prior evidence suggests that KaDeWe had become such an important institution in Berlin's cityscape that even in the midst of shutting down all existing Jewish-owned businesses, the National Socialist Party opted to force a transition of ownership instead of shutting down the economic consumerist marvel that was KaDeWe. Surprisingly, despite the new ownership, little changes happened inside the store during Nazi rule. KaDeWe proved itself to be a fully functional and self-sufficient retail empire.

Unfortunately, in 1943 an American airplane struck KaDeWe during a bombing raid on Berlin. The store survived, yet it was almost burnt to the ground, and its salvageability played a large role in setting its later reconstruction. The lesson to take here is that the National Socialist Party's rule over Germany, in spite of its promotion of protectionist retail policies, was not conducive to economic consumerist purposes. KaDeWe with its transfer from Jewish to Aryan ownership reflected the social ideologies of the government at the time. Since Berlin functions as the capital of Germany, it made sense that

the City's shining star of consumerism should have also been utilized as a source of indirect propaganda.

Hence, we can understand how KaDeWe became a cultural and political institution alongside its initial consumerist purpose. As major political events took place in Berlin, they were emulated within KaDeWe itself. Following the conclusion of the war, upon reopening, KaDeWe became a symbol of a new beginning for the destroyed city Berlin was. It is important to note that the airplane crash caused KaDeWe to shut down for years while it underwent renovations to reconstruct the building back to its previous glory. Seven years after, the department store reopened. Over 180,000 Germans celebrated KaDeWe's grand reopening.¹⁶ Six years later, KaDeWe was expanded to seven floors and its International Gourmet floor was inaugurated. In 1976 the store expanded once again to 44,000 square metres. Such a grand enterprise exemplifies how KaDeWe's reconstruction was seen as more than simply a reopening of a department store. The restoration of this centre for consumerism became emblematic of the potential for Berlin's economic growth; the store served as a symbol of socio-economic and political power.

The idea that *Kaufhaus Des Westens* serves as a symbol of socio-economic and political power can be further perceived during the late 1960s and early 1970s, when it became the centre for repeated political attacks and protests. One example of a protest at KaDeWe was in December of 1969. A group of demonstrators were protesting the Vietnam War, declaring their solidarity with victims of American engagement. To the protestors, department stores and therefore KaDeWe served as the epitome of capitalist aggression and was synonymous with America.¹⁷ The demonstration passed through West Berlin's main shopping streets, and after the protest,

some chose to continue their demonstration within the walls of KaDeWe at which point, police were called to remove the protestors. Another instance happened a year earlier, where protestors stormed the store, shouting "KaDeWe, we'll get you", when a judge appointed by the National Socialist Party's was acquitted from his implications in many death sentences.¹⁸

Nevertheless, these protests were not always limited to demonstrations against social injustices. At times, they fought legislations, specifically legislations in favour of capitalism. In August 1967, a demonstration developed against a law allowing extended store hours on Saturdays. The demonstration caused the store to close earlier when sit-in groups began to form on every floor of the department store, preventing the store from continuing its daily operations.¹⁹ These attacks and protests validate KaDeWe's role as more than an infrastructure of consumerism. The centralized location of KaDeWe was also important through this time of political unrest. Even if KaDeWe was not the main target of demonstrations, many rallies took place outside and it damaged to the store. Of note, a rally commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the murders of communist leaders Luxemburg and Liebknecht resulted in the smashing of KaDeWe's storefront windows.²⁰ During this time of political unrest, the Berlin department store became a site for its citizens to protest against social injustices, government and civic issues, thusly transitioning *Kaufhaus Des Westens* from a simple luxury department store into a truly civic space.

Moreover, after the War, a restitution settlement in 1949 recognized the Tietz family true heirs of this department store.²¹ The Karg foundation, (the foundation named after Georg Karg, the appointed "Aryan"

managing director), recognized the Tietz family as the lawful proprietors of the store in 1972.²² Accordingly, KaDeWe exemplifies restitution settlements that took place after the war. In the post-war years, many Jewish proprietors were properly recognized as having been harmed by the National Socialist Party. Such action was meant to help make amends with wronged communities. These insights suggest that post-war KaDeWe served as a symbol for a new beginning for a city and nation. KaDeWe inspired a hope for economic gain while representing the will to make amends with those who were wronged under the Nazi rule. Just as Berlin was going through a rebirth in the post-war period, so was its premium department store *Kaufhaus Des Westens*.

Furthermore, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, West Berlin experienced a boom in consumerism, specifically noted in increased sales at KaDeWe. KaDeWe became a place for East Berliners or "Ostis" to experience the worldliness of western consumerism in an otherwise isolated city. To appreciate this point, we need to keep in mind East Berlin was controlled by the Soviet Union, under a communist regime. Consumerism and capitalism were unheard of in East Berlin until the fall of the Wall. Barthold Pelzer and Alexander Sedelmaier discuss how West Berlin was severely isolated from the rest of the world; however, it still maintained an abundance of goods in department stores such as KaDeWe. This array of goods became a definition of West Berlin's consumerist identity, in juxtaposition to the sparse shelves of East Berlin's stores.²³ While considering this, we can understand that once the Wall was destroyed, East Berliners flocked to KaDeWe to experience the worldliness of Western consumerist ideals. KaDeWe experienced the biggest boom in visitors and sales immediately after Reunification. Such a rise of consumers resulted in yet another renovation in 1991. Adding another floor and a new restaurant

under the glass atrium, the sales surface was expanded to 60,000 square metres.²⁴ Hence, we can perceive this boom as reflective of the growth of the city. During this short period, KaDeWe distributed free milk and coffee to "Ostis" and sold bananas which were difficult to find in East Berlin. We can then conclude that the impact of reunification on KaDeWe's patrons and sales was directly associated with the economic boom that took place during the reunification of Berlin, if not Germany. All of a sudden, once the Wall was torn down, there was an entirely new population of eligible KaDeWe patrons. KaDeWe was known as a place for its consumers to experience the ever-popular and ever-worldly idealisms of Western consumerism.

Subsequently, one is left wondering what could be next for KaDeWe. The store faced constant rebirths in order to remain relevant in an era of new modernism. Most recently architectural plans were created to completely redefine the space of this large department store. Somehow, despite multiculturalism and vast arrays of products within its store, KaDeWe manages to maintain its identity as an explicitly German retail space; reflecting the cultural views and consumerist needs of its politically-inclined city-state. KaDeWe's is maintains itself at the forefront of the battle to stay relevant in a multiculturalist society. With competition from multi-national stores and brands as well as online shopping, KaDeWe must strive to serve its customers with an experience that is alongside their shopping needs.

Numerous marketing ploys have been implemented to aid with the so-called cultural experience of shopping at KaDeWe, relating it to the German (and more specifically Berliner) consumerist ideals. These ideals relate back to the personalized experience of shopping at a small locally owned and operated boutique from the early

1900s. KaDeWe has fought for the individualization and personalization of the shopping experience. The store prides itself on promoting Berliner consumerist ideals, providing a sense of civic identity, instead of the cold impersonalized experience of a large department store. In February of 2015, the KaDeWe Premium Group commissioned Frau Tonis, a perfumery, to create a line of three fragrances enveloping the stores in their respective civic states, Berlin, Hamburg and Munich.²⁵ The commissioning of a signature scent based off the civic centre in which the store resides is yet another indicator of the high regard in which KaDeWe holds itself within the historical significance of Berlin. *Kaufhaus Des Westens'* commission linking the department store to the city is once again another representation of how KaDeWe builds to the civil identity through olfaction in Germany's metropolitan capital.

Additionally, many renovations have been completed over the early 2000s. *Kaufhaus Des Westens* obtained many inventory additions such as a luxury beauty department, a new shoe and bag world, international designer labels that occupy 20,000 square meters alongside a luxury boulevard with top-end designers.²⁶ Further renovations were completed to maintain the shopping experience, including a redesign of the Wintergarten Restaurant, refurbishing the third and fifth floors to open a wellness area and four new beauty lounges. From the preceding information, we can infer that KaDeWe is in a constant state of refurbishment. Hence, the store remodels itself approximately every ten years. Remodelling is so common at KaDeWe that they released an advertising campaign in 2012 called "Es Kommt Noch Besser" or "It Gets Even Better", with glossy photos glorifying construction and redevelopment. *Kaufhaus Des Westens* is able to stay relevant

within the scope of multiculturalism because of its ever-changing architecture, which follows alongside the social history of Berlin.

Lastly, in January 2016, plans were released by OMA, an international architecture firm, to completely revamp and modernize the *Kaufhaus Des Westens* store. These plans, to be completed in 2018, include splitting KaDeWe into four separate sections, each with its own street entrance and distinct architectural style. Each quadrant will serve as an individual department store, targeting a different demographic. Although the final four have not been set in stone, potential themes are classic, experimental, young, generic and etcetera.²⁷ The division of the store into smaller quadrants helps the consumer have a more fluid, navigable and therefore easier shopping experience. Each section would be arranged around a central atrium, which would also act as the primary vertical distribution space.²⁸ In addition to the separation of four different spacial experiences, each of the nine levels of the building differing in size and style will become unique. The cross-shaped organizational system further accentuates the quadrants on each floor, this extreme organization is meant to help the infrastructure operate under multiple conditions and uses.²⁹ The existing Wintergarten restaurant with its vaulted rooftop will be replaced with a new glass volume extending from the original profile of the structure. This new feature will contain an open-air courtyard that will create a space for outdoor programming and for a food laboratory.³⁰

From the preceding information, we can infer that the exponential size of *Kaufhaus Des Westens* has proven to be an issue in its transition to modernization. In the modern world, patrons of KaDeWe and other department stores worldwide, are looking for a more user-friendly experience. Instead of relying on employees to guide pa-

trons in the right direction, the navigation of the store should be organically ingrained in the architecture itself. A large single spaced department store can have a negative effect on consumers, as they become overwhelmed and lost within the store. By dividing KaDeWe into four separate sections, each with its own individual store, this store makes its shopping experience more fluid and facile for its consumers, providing a more welcoming environment. The lesson to take here is that just as Berlin's future in history is not finite, neither is KaDeWe's. It is the department store's responsibility to adapt to Berlin's ever changing civic and social needs. A place that has been not only the centre of consumerism but also a socially and politically significant space throughout history has the responsibility to promote the ideals of the city it represents. This new era of modernism for *Kaufhaus Des Westens* is representative of the growth potential for Berlin as a whole.

To conclude, the controversies behind the initial construction of the department store building type provide insight to the success of KaDeWe during the early Weimar Republic period; but not all socio-political events were conducive to the success of KaDeWe as evidenced by the detrimental changes experienced by the Nazi's rise to power. Following the War, upon the store's reopening, KaDeWe became a symbol of a new beginning for a city rebuilding from the ashes of total destruction. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, this capital city experienced a boom in consumerism, exemplified by the increased sales volume as East Berliners flocked to the department store to experience the worldliness of western consumerism. What is next for the notoriously luxurious *Kaufhaus Des Westens*? In an era of new modernism where the experience of shopping itself is ever-changing, the premium department store must embrace

a constant rebirth to maintain its relevance as an explicitly German retail space, reflecting the cultural views and consumerist needs of the city it serves. As the official website for Berlin states, *Kaufhaus Des Westens* survived 20th-century German history, which reflects the city's highs and lows. "Between consumer temple and Berlin institution",³¹ *Kaufhaus Des Westens* is more than a simple department store in Berlin; it is an institution of consumerism, culture and politics for twentieth century Germany.

Notes

1. "KaDeWe", <http://oma.eu/projects/kadewe>
2. Ibid.
3. "History - KaDeWe Berlin," November 16, 2016, accessed November 10, 2016, http://www.kadewe.de/en/home_english/content/unser-haus-historie-1/.
4. Sabine Hake, *Topographies of Class: Modern Architecture and Mass Society in Weimar Berlin* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008) pp 33.
5. Fredric Bedoire and Roger Tanner, *Architecture Judaica: Jewish Contribution to Modern Architecture 1830-1930* (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 2003) pp 253.
6. Ibid.
7. "History - KaDeWe Berlin".
8. Hake, *Topographies of Class*, (2008)
9. Pelle Snickars, "Berlin Under the Sign of the Cinematograph: Urban Mobility and Cinema Location in Wilhelmine Berlin," May 2010, http://pellesnickars.se/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/snickars_berlin_kintop.pdf, 4.
10. Ibid., 5.
11. Ibid., 5.
12. Ibid., 5.
13. "History - KaDeWe Berlin".
14. Jonathan S Wiesen, *Creating the Nazi Marketplace: Commerce and Consumption in the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
15. "KaDeWe," <https://www.berlin.de/en/attractions-and-sights/3560281-3104052-kadewe.en.html>.
16. "History - KaDeWe Berlin".
17. Barthold Pelzer and Alexander Sedelmaier, "Places of Global Shape: The World Consumption in Divided Berlin," chap. 9 in *Circulation and the City: Essays on urban culture*, by Alexandra Boutros and Will Straw (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014) 228.
18. Ibid., 228.
19. Ibid., 212.
20. Ibid., 228.
21. "History - KaDeWe Berlin".
22. "KaDeWe," November 19, 2015, accessed November 1, 2016, <https://www.berlin.de/en/attractions-and-sights/3560281-3104052-kadewe.en.html>.

23. Pelzer and Sedelmaier, "Places of Global Shape: The World Consumption in Divided Berlin," 212.
24. "History - KaDeWe Berlin".
25. KaDeWe Group Creates Own Perfumes' Business Scent." Accessed December 1, 2016. <https://www.frau-tonis-parfum.com/en/business-scent/>.
26. "History - KaDeWe Berlin".
27. KaDeWe", <http://oma.eu/projects/kadewe>.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.

Bibliography

- Bedoire, Fredric and Roger Tanner. *Architecture Judaica: Jewish Contribution to Modern Architecture 1830-1930*. Jersey City, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 2003.
- Carter, Erica. *How German Is She? Postwar West German Reconstruction and the Consuming Woman*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997.
- GmbH, Parasol Island. "History - KaDeWe Berlin." November 16, 2016. Accessed November 10, 2016. http://www.kadewe.de/en/home_english/content/unser/haus-historie-1/.
- Hake, Sabine. *Topographies of Class: Modern Architecture and Mass Society in Weimar Berlin*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008.
- "KaDeWe." Accessed November 3, 2016. <http://oma.eu/projects/kadewe>.
- "KaDeWe." November 19, 2015. Accessed November 1, 2016. <https://www.berlin.de/en/attractions-and-sights/3560281-3104052-kadewe.en.html>.
- "KaDeWe Group Creates Own Perfumes' Business Scent." Accessed December 1, 2016. <https://www.frau-tonis-parfum.com/en/business-scent/>.
- Masur, Gerhard, and Michael Walzer. *Just and Unjust Wars: Incorporating the Lessons of Operation Desert Storm*. New York: Basic Books, 1971.
- Pelzer, Barthold and Alexander Sedelmaier. "Places of Global Shape: The World Consumption in Divided Berlin."

Chap. 9 in *Circulation and the City: Essays on urban culture*, eds. Alexandra Boutros and Will Straw, 214-40. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014.

Ramsey, Sarah. "It Gets Even Better' KaDeWe and Urban Memory in Berlin." Berkeley, California: UC Berkeley College of Environmental Design, 2013.

Snickars, Pelle. "Berlin Under the Sign of the Cinematograph: Urban Mobility and Cinema Location in Wilhelmine Berlin." May 2010. http://pellesnickars.se/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/snickars_berlin_kintop.pdf

Wiesen, Jonathan S. *Creating the Nazi Marketplace: Commerce and Consumption in the Third Reich*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Williams, Adam. "Europe's Largest Department Store Will Be Split into Four." 2016. Accessed November 10, 2016. <http://newatlas.com/oma-kadewe-berlinrenovati on/41435/>.