

MoMo at Risk: Sport and Recreation Center (SEZ) in Berlin (1981)

Abstract:

*Docomomo Germany expresses serious concern about the future of the **Sport and Recreation Center (SEZ) in Berlin** and calls for an immediate moratorium on demolition and for the granting of heritage protection.*

The Sport and Recreation Center (SEZ) in Berlin, opened in 1981, is one of the most significant examples of late GDR modernism and was among the largest leisure and bathing facilities in Europe at the time. The complex held and holds immense social importance for the GDR population. Designed and build in collaboration with the West German company HOCHTIEF, it is an outstanding testimony to East–West German cooperation during the Cold War.

After years of neglect following German reunification, the building is now threatened by demolition in favor of new housing development. Despite recent partial demolitions, the structure remains fundamentally capable of conservation, rehabilitation and context-sensitive development. Given its architectural, historical, and social significance, the SEZ urgently requires a demolition moratorium, heritage protection and comprehensive documentation. The spacious site allows for compromise solutions that largely preserve the complex, adapt it to new uses, and at the same time integrate additional housing development: preservation through continued building.



Citizens demonstrating against the demolition of the SEZ (@Nedelykov Moreira Architekten).

Full text:

In the summer of 1977, shortly after the completion of the now vanished Palast der Republik, the Construction Directorate for Special Projects Berlin (Aufbauleitung Sondervorhaben Berlin) developed a master plan for the creation of a spacious recreational complex at Volkspark Friedrichshain in the then capital of the GDR. On March 20, 1981, the Sport and Recreation Center (SEZ) was officially opened as a flagship project.

Its creation is an extraordinary example of cooperation between East and West Germany during the Cold War. The SEZ was commissioned by Erhardt Gißke, head of the Construction Directorate for Special Projects Berlin and Chief Architect of the GDR, to the West German construction company HOCHTIEF. Within HOCHTIEF's West Berlin planning department, the construction-ready design was developed under the direction of Günther Reiß. As a refugee from the GDR, Reiß could not appear officially as the architect. Reinforced concrete was supplied from Sweden, and numerous state-owned enterprises (VEBs) from across East Germany were involved in the construction.

With 35,000 square meters of floor space and a plot of almost 50,000 square meters, the SEZ was one of the largest bathing complexes of its time in Europe, also offering numerous other facilities for sports, recreation, and social gatherings. The SEZ was

incredibly popular with the East German population: in its first year alone, it attracted almost 4 million visitors, and by the year 2000, it averaged 15,000 visitors per day.



SEZ in the year of its opening (1981), view from outside



SEZ in the year of its opening (1981), outdoor swimming pool

The significance and symbolic power of the building were undisputed, even though its operation was heavily subsidized by the state.

After 1990, the SEZ was politically and economically marginalized, sold in 2003, and neglected for years. Since its retransfer to the State of Berlin in 2023, there are plans to develop new housing. Further structural losses have occurred. Heritage protection status was recommended on July 11, 2025, by the Berlin State Monuments Council (Landesdenkmalrat) but denied by the Berlin State Monuments Office (Landesdenkmalamt). In the first months of 2026, the large outdoor swimming pool was rapidly demolished and trees were felled. Nevertheless, the building remains structurally capable of conservation and rehabilitation. In February 2026 the Office for the Environment and Nature Conservation of the district ordered an immediate halt to demolition work due to concerns regarding species protection laws. But this is just a temporary halt. Meanwhile, as of August 2028, a huge construction site setup has been installed in front of the SEZ, and excavators are already on site.



Citizens demonstrating against the demolition of the SEZ (@Nedelykov Moreira Architekten).

Docomomo Deutschland supports the plea of the citizens' initiatives "SEZ für Alle" and "Gemeingut in BürgerInnenhand," as well as numerous professional colleagues, for an immediate DEMOLITION MORATORIUM. Due to its historical, typological, and social significance, the SEZ should be placed under heritage protection. The SEZ is one of the

most important buildings of GDR modernism, a significant—if not unique—example of the building type of bath and sports complex, and a testament to shared German history. It holds high social value as a site of memory and identification.

Its striking urban form, distinctive architectural language, and technical innovations in structural engineering and building services (including energy recovery systems, among others) characterize a building that deserves the status of a listed monument.

In addition, Docomomo Deutschland advocates—on historical, architectural-historical, ecological, and social grounds—for comprehensive documentation and in-depth analysis of the existing structure, as well as for the development of planning concepts that enable a preservation-oriented development—rather than the destruction—of the SEZ.

The spacious site allows for compromise solutions that largely preserve the complex, adapt it to new uses, and at the same time integrate additional housing development: preservation through continued building.