

# BARE ESSENTIALS —Berlin

**Preface**

Bikini Berlin is a newly redesigned complex mixing retail, culture and creative thinking about public space. Once a fading relic of the Cold War, intelligent ideas from its new tenants are helping to redefine the shopping-mall model.

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Robert Klanten, CEO of Gestalten publishing, sits in a deep chair in front of a wall of windows watching monkeys play on rock formations outside. He is overlooking the Berlin zoological garden from Gestalten Pavilion, his company's new mixed-use space: a café-lounge, design store and bookshop all in one. It's perched atop Bikini Berlin, the city's highly anticipated new "concept mall", that opened in early April.

The airy pavilion buzzes with early-morning customers perusing objects that might appear in Gestalten's many books on visual culture (Gestalten is also the publisher of *The Monocle Guide to Better Living*). "The strategy is that we present the products in the books instead of just images of them," says Klanten who – with his wife – codesigned the displays and lounge furniture. "We've seen change not just in retail but in how creative people produce."

It's a reflection of Bikini Berlin's shift away from mainstream and mass-produced goods, which is redefining shopping in the resurgent west Berlin. The complex – which also includes a 10-storey 25hours hotel by designer Werner Aisslinger and the famous Zoo Palast cinema – was once known as Zentrum am Zoo, and was built in 1957 to plans by architects Paul Schwebes and Hans Schoszberger. Near



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shopping street Kurfürstendamm, it became an icon of free-market commerce in divided post-war Germany. (The central building was named "Bikinihaus" by locals at the time because of the six-tier structure's resemblance to the swimwear.) In Bikinihaus's former incarnation, retail became increasingly downmarket over the decades, the pavements between it and the Gedächtniskirche a haven for skateboarders.

Today, the complex's airy redesign by Munich architects Hild und K is a



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cleverly constructed home to a selection of permanent shops ranging from Carhartt and Schiesser Revival to Aspesi, Odeh and Berlin avant-garde fashion institution Andreas Murkudis. In the main hall (an architectural addition behind the original slim building) are 19 Bikini Boxes: wooden pop-up booths in which smaller independent purveyors can set up shop for three to 12 months and which assure that shoppers will always return to find something new.

Another fluid, changeable space is a large ground-floor store called Supernova. Curated by Bikini's team and local creative agency Kemmler Kemmler, Supernova pairs two brands – initially Nike and Berlin sportswear company Firmament – every four months, experimenting with product lines (here, Nike presents only "pinnacle" products) and social spaces such as a station where customers can kick footballs into a goal.

Even more socially inviting is Bikini's uppermost portion: a 7,000 sq m terrace accessible from both the street and indoors. The terrace is a meeting point with sweeping views of Tiergarten park. "It's like a park, allowing a mix of being inside and outside, culture, shopping – and monkeys," says Klanten.

It wasn't always clear whether rethinking the mall would work: the buildings were acquired 12 years ago by Munich-based property developer Bayerischen Hausbau, which waited for the right moment to decide on the direction. "We thought we'd either go mainstream with Zara and H&M, or we'd go arthouse," says Kai-Uwe Ludwig, a CEO at Bayerischen Hausbau and head of Bikini Berlin. The company eventually chose arthouse. "Again and again we doubted whether we were doing the right thing."

The risks have clearly paid off; Ludwig beams as his sons kick footballs at Supernova. Retail tenants were at

## The right mix

Bikini Berlin's success lies not only in reusing decades-old buildings but also in transforming a fallow zone into a highly successful public space; a new urban gathering point in the heart of Berlin's western city centre. "Everyone feels that this is ideal city planning," says Dionys Ottl of the architecture firm behind the transformation, Hild und K. "Bikini has culture, commerce and hospitality; everything can cross-pollinate and all levels of society can meet. Usually that mixture has to be artificially created but here it comes together."



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first tentative but early adopters such as Andreas Murkudis brought brands he'd worked with such as Aspesi and Closed (where his brother Kostas Murkudis is head designer) onboard.

Later came a store from newly merged design companies Vitra and Artek, Vitra Loves Artek, joining only eight weeks before Bikini's grand opening. "The furniture business is changing," says Artek CEO Mirkku Kullberg. "It's becoming more multichannel. You want a place like an urban living room." Vitra Loves Artek is just that. In a 200 sq m space by Berlin architects Gonzalez Haase, Vitra and Artek furnishings are complemented by products from Comme des Garçons and local outlets such as magazine store Do You Read Me?! and Giro Coffee Bar. Customers sit in chairs, read, and have a latte. "Since the morning it opened it has been constant," says Kullberg, smiling.

Nearly half a million people visited in Bikini Berlin's first week, "living proof that retail is changing," says Klanten. "This is a role model for what can be done with the idea of the shopping mall." — (M)



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- 02 The Gestalten Pavilion
- 03 Products in the Gestalten Pavilion
- 04 Robert Klanten, CEO of Gestalten
- 05 Pop-up stores below the gallery level
- 06 The Andreas Murkudis store
- 07 Baboons in the neighbouring zoo, viewed from the Bikini terrace
- 08 Antti Tevajarvi of Artek's 2nd Cycle initiative