

# International Property

June 20, 2014 6:14 pm

## Developers find new use for former airports

By Gisela Williams

Airfields are being transformed into new urban spaces from shopping malls to parks



©Tempelhof Projekt

The old Tempelhof airport in Berlin (Photograph: Tempelhof Projekt)

**O**n a recent summer's morning, the Tempelhof Field in central Berlin, a former airport built between 1936 and 1941 by the Nazis – and the site of the 1948 airlift – resembled a scene out of *Blade Runner*. Wild grass was growing on the edges of crumbling runways, the gated-off terminal (once one of the largest buildings in the world) appeared empty and full of ghosts, and makeshift allotments grew at the far end of the mile-long main central runway.

The 400-hectare airfield was opened up to the public in 2010, 18 months after it was decommissioned. Klaus Wowereit, the city's mayor, negotiated a deal to rent out part of the terminal, hangars

and the grounds to Bread & Butter, an international fashion trade show, which hosts streetwear labels and parties on the tarmac. The Tempelhof Field, also called Tempelhofer Freiheit (or freedom), was a big success, attracting artists and creatives from all over the city.

In March 2013 Tempelhof Projekt, which is in charge of the development, published its master plan, which included the construction of a National Library and affordable housing along the side of Tempelhoferdamm. Many people drawn to this area protested against the plan, mobilising around a group called “100% Tempelhofer Feld”, and 65 per cent of Berliners polled have voted against development at the site. “Now nothing can be touched or built except temporary structures,” says Christoph Schuster, head of asset and property management for Tempelhof Projekt.

So life at the airfield continues in the same way, and the threat of major development work has subsided.

“This year has been our most successful one yet as an event location. Events pay half our bills. They’re even filming *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay* film here,” adds Schuster.

Thomas Lovegrove, a Berlin-based aerospace journalist and historian, explains that it will be “tricky” to develop the former airport, “primarily on account of its unusually central urban location, but also due to the importance of its place in history. Unlike Tegel [Berlin’s airport terminal to the north of the city centre], Tempelhof represents a dream for developers, and this is a source of tension with a local population that has been gifted not only valued park space, but is also adamant that it will help determine the future of the site.”

Tegel, completed in 1974, will be closed once the new Berlin Brandenburg airport opens. And while nobody can say exactly when that will happen, Tegel already has a sophisticated plan in place that is receiving support from all sides. With the help of architects such as Graft and GMP, the proposals will include green spaces together with some residential properties.

• • •

Another airport development is taking place in Greece: Athens’ Hellinikon airport, ignored for almost a decade, was recently sold to Lamda Development for €915m. Although Athens has experienced plenty of protests lately, there seem to have been few complaints about the Norman Foster-led proposals for Hellinikon.



CGI of the Hellinikon development in Athens (Photograph: Lamda)

In addition to the price of the site, Lamda plans to spend an additional €5.9bn on the project over the next 15 years. According to Lamda chief executive Odysseas Athanasiou, the first steps – which could start as soon as 2016 – will involve removing the tarmac, cleaning the undersoil, creating at least a third of the park (Lamda promised that the green space, when finished, will come to 2m sq metres – one of the largest in Europe) and starting to construct an aquarium, museum, shopping mall, and the marina residential tower – high-end apartments with views of the sea, park and, on a clear day, the Acropolis. Upmarket residential developments built around the park are also key to this development.

“In the past 30 years, the city’s upscale suburbs were developed in the north, by the mountains, rather than the south,” says Konstantinos Paschalides, president of the executive board of the consultancy firm. “Until now it hasn’t taken into consideration its face towards the sea. Right now everybody is realising that the future, in terms of luxury residential developments, should take place in the south.”

To that end, Hellinikon is not alone in investing in this idea of an Athenian riviera. Also being developed nearby is the Astir Palace resort and Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center, which will be designed by Renzo Piano and will include new facilities for the National Library of Greece and the Greek National Opera.

One of the inspirations for Hellinikon – reportedly one of the largest construction schemes in Europe and incorporating nearly a mile of coastline – is Marina Bay Sands in Singapore, says Lamda’s Athanasiou.

Tempelhof represents a dream for developers, and this is a source of tension with a local population

Of course, in a country where it is reported that a quarter of Greeks are unemployed, support is easier to find for a project that city planners predict will create in the region of 35,000 construction jobs over the next 10 years. That estimate is perhaps not so unrealistic. Almost 20 years after Stapleton International airport in Denver, Colorado, was decommissioned, a mixed-use development on the site – which is like a small city within a city – generates almost \$45m a year in property and sales tax alone.

Stapleton, like Berlin's Adlershof (a science, technology and media park set in more than 1,000 acres) is seen as a major accomplishment for the city.

"People really like the fact that it has excellent schools, that kids can walk to school, and that there are five different public pools. They also like community events – such as farmers' markets and movie nights – that take place on the town green," says Jim Chrisman, who has been involved in the project since the 1990s and is currently senior vice-president of Forest City Stapleton. At Stapleton, high-end family homes with three to five bedrooms start at \$700,000.

Chrisman explains that the main reason behind Stapleton's success is that, from the start, they were able to get some excellent schools on board.

In addition, even before the airport had closed, a group of local business owners and civic officials, who were concerned that the area would turn into a mess of industrial subdivisions, raised money and created a non-profit group to develop what they eventually called the *Green Book*. This document was a manifesto for a sustainable forward-thinking development, which would set aside at least a quarter of the land as open space.

Stapleton served as a helpful guide when the city of Austin, Texas, had to plan for the conversion of the old Mueller airport, says the project's main architect, Jim Adams. Like Stapleton, ripping out the runways and creating green spaces was one of the first steps they executed.

Back in Berlin, while some are frustrated by the lack of take-off in Tempelhof's development, others are happy it is still a quirky, wild space.

Properties near the park, in the Schillerkiez area and the family-friendly houses in Tempelhof's Fliegerviertel, are said to have doubled in value over the past three years.

Some leaders in Berlin's government understand that the city not only owes its huge tourism numbers to its urban spaces, but also its reputation for tolerance and non-commercialism. "Young people want to be where life is," says Dr Philipp Bouteiller.

"Berlin has turned into an amazing hotspot for talent. More and more corporations are setting up 'living labs' and research facilities here to tap into the innovation culture."

He adds: "It's the city's non-profit ventures, crazy ideas and colour that are Berlin's major strength."