

World War II left Nuremberg in ruins. In a spirit of new beginnings, dedicated stakeholders began imbuing the city with new life. Important groundwork for Nuremberg's development as a major site for trade fairs was done by the Spielwarenmesse, but important contributions also came from two exhibition companies, the Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Ausstellungen GmbH (AFAG) and Messehallen GmbH. Their unstinting efforts and successes ultimately led to the moment when the City of Nuremberg decided to build a new exhibition centre – the starting point for a new configuration of the exhibition company. **A look back at the era of origins.**



The Spielwarenmesse made its debut in the Wieseler-Haus. In 1957 it was held for the last time under the name of the "Deutsche Spielwaren-Fachmesse".

A big hit

All in all, the first iteration of the *Spielwarenmesse* in 1950 occupied some 3,200 square metres of exhibition space, where 351 exhibitor companies displayed their wares. Space per exhibitor was tight – 137 applicants had to be turned away. The number of visitors was unexpectedly great: 4,341 buyers came to Nuremberg during the seven-day event, including some 600 international guests, one-sixth of them from overseas. The appeal and crush of attendance at the first *Spielwarenmesse* in Nuremberg were so great that no one even bothered to question whether the event should be held again in Nuremberg in subsequent years.

Early trade fairs in the city centre

The first "German Trade Fair for Toys" in Nuremberg, festively opened by Federal Economy Minister Dr Ludwig Erhard, Bavarian Economy Minister Dr Hanns Seidel, and Nuremberg Lord Mayor Otto Ziebill in what was then the Lessingtheater at the Deutscher Hof hotel, had its main showplace at the Wieseler-Haus on Berliner Platz right next to the City Park. That building, which dated from 1923, had hitherto served as an administration and exhibition building for the Nürnberger Bund, a porcelain and ceramics wholesalers' organisation, which held its spring and fall exchanges there. It offered a basement and three storeys for exhibitions. Additional space was rented in places like the Gemeindehaus Maxfeld, two large tents, rooms at the newly restored Gewerbe-museum, and other sites.

Following the first *Spielwarenmesse* in 1950, the extensive and laudatory feedback included these words from a Swiss participant, who also addressed the question of the location:

»It might occur to some to wonder why in Germany especially, the country of the Leipzig Trade



A first logo with the "Fat Tower" (Königstor), 1950 (above). The second *Spielwarenmesse* was already using the hobbyhorse-and-tower combination, 1951 (below).

Fair and the large-scale trade fairs of Hanover, Frankfurt and Cologne, a separate trade fair for toys was now suddenly being held, and planned to be repeated annually. Well, the answer is simple: The other trade fairs do not meet the needs of the diverse German toy industry. The idea was simply to combine the full range of West German toy products at a single fair, and thus add an incentive for international buyers in particular and to facilitate the work of the fair for both them and German buyers. Thus arose the idea of the Nuremberg trade fair – and to forestall any suspense about the outcome, the idea proved its worth and paid off.»¹⁸

The heart of the toy industry would now include a trade fair in Nuremberg – especially because the event was welcomed so enthusiastically by the city's population.

Here is what the "Süddeutsche Zeitung" reported in 1950: "The decorated trams and buildings show that this event – which is really only intended for professionals – also enjoys lively goodwill among the entire population."¹⁹

A venue's success and growth

In expanding the trade fair space available, an early important factor for the Spielwarenmesse was its cooperation with the Nürnberger Bund, the porcelain and ceramics wholesalers' organisation that owned the Wieseler-Haus. The options to expand that space with additions and new construction were soon exhausted. In 1952, the managers of the Spielwarenmesse began working towards developing their own exhibition building, and they applied to the Free State of Bavaria and the City of Nuremberg for financial support. At the same time, the city wanted to build a municipal hall for cultural events. The Bavarian State provided grants, subject to the condition that the City of Nuremberg and the Spielwarenmesse had to form a joint company to build an exhibition hall. And so it happened: On 10 June 1952, Messehallen GmbH was founded. The company was owned 6/11 by the Spielwarenmesse and 5/11 by the City of Nuremberg for the "construction, maintenance, and operation of exhibition halls on a portion, still to be surveyed ... of the former grounds of the Municipal Plant Nursery on Bayreutherstrasse in Nuremberg, together with all the customarily associated incidental businesses."²⁰ It was explicitly specified that "the exhibition halls will be available exclusively to Spielwaren-Fachmesse e.G.m.b.H." for the period from "4 weeks before the start until 8 days after the conclusion of the annual Trade Fair for Toys."²¹

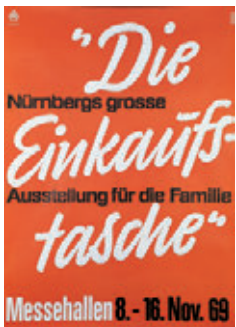
10 June
1952

Messehallen GmbH
founded

The City of Nuremberg would be given priority to use the space for the rest of the year. Fritz Drescher, a managing director of the Spielwarenmesse, was appointed the sole managing director of Messehallen GmbH. The Shareholders' Meeting was chaired by Nuremberg Lord Mayor Otto Bärnreuther, who took office in 1952.

Toys, concerts, and consumers in the new hall

Construction work began immediately. The new exhibition hall was already available to host the 1953 Spielwarenmesse in its 3,200 square metres of exhibition space, and it offered a site for concerts and other events for the city. And from 1952, Nuremberg also regularly held exhibitions open to the general public. AFAG, headed by Director Helmuth Könicke – which had successfully run the German Construction Exhibition back in 1949 and the exhibition for the city's 900th birthday in 1950 – organised several new events at the rising exhibition venue at the City Park. This included "Die Einkaufstasche", "The Shopping Bag", an autumn show of consumer goods. The first of its kind in Bavaria, this fair also enjoyed rapid growth. Its premiere was attended by 25,000 visitors, and by the mid-1950s it was an annual feature of the Nuremberg event calendar. By 1960 attendance had risen to 50,000 visitors, and by 1967 there were more than 100,000 attendees.



A poster for "Die Einkaufstasche", 1969.



At the "Einkaufstasche" – shown here in 1956 – people could find whatever their hearts desired.



Leading characters (L to R): Bavarian Prime Minister Dr Hans Ehard, Federal Economy Minister Prof. Dr Ludwig Erhard, Nuremberg Lord Mayor Dr Andreas Urschlechter, and Fritz Drescher, Director of Spielwarenmesse and Messehallen GmbH, after the opening of the international Spielwarenmesse in 1963.

“ ... do something big, not the everyday, for Nuremberg ... ”

Forty thousand square metres: That was about the amount of space available to the international Spielwarenmesse after the Europa-Haus was completed in 1966, including all auxiliary structures. But the venue’s capacity was exhausted. One possible solution was to use what open space remained, including the City Park. But the service capabilities would still be limited, and along with the overloaded infrastructure, that would only exacerbate the situation. A fundamental question was looming that would decide the further development of the exhibition business in Nuremberg: Did Nuremberg need a new exhibition venue, or would the still very respectable status quo that had evolved since 1950 be enough? If only for financial reasons, the vision of an exhibition site to be laid out and built entirely from scratch seemed entirely illusory for now. Given their scope, these challenges could no longer be met by Messehallen GmbH, Spielwarenmesse eG, or AFAG. The city government was asked to step in, and the City Council and its committees addressed the situation. Nuremberg’s future as a city of trade fairs came up for debate.

On 19 June 1968, the City Council asked the relevant departments at City Hall – along with fair organisers Fritz Drescher (acting for both Messehallen GmbH and the Spielwarenmesse) and Helmuth Könicke (of AFAG) – to prepare a report on the status of the exhibition business in Nuremberg and the potential for attracting new trade fairs.

That report comprehensively portrayed the past, present, and future prospects of Nuremberg as a city of trade fairs and was presented by the city’s newly appointed Economic Affairs Officer, Dr Wilhelm Doni, to the City Council at a meeting in February 1969.²⁶

Dr Doni portrayed Nuremberg’s improved situation: its advancing reconstruction and its attractive location for large trade fairs. He argued that gaining the status of a city of trade fairs would enhance Nuremberg’s appeal and have a multiplier effect for both the city and the local economy. Nuremberg, he said, had earned itself a good reputation, but “tradition alone will not be enough to preserve a trade fair venue. Because for the long term, only those trade fair sites survive that have excellent facilities.”²⁷ Doni explained that more construction on the existing site at Berliner Platz and Bayreuther Strasse could not ensure the city’s future as a trade fair hub, even though this would be less expensive at first. A new, modern site that also had the potential for future expansion was needed. He asked the City Council not to decide, but rather to investigate the feasibility and the planning required for a new exhibition centre. The report and its arguments met with approval from Willy Pröls and Dr Oscar Schneider, the heads of the city’s two main political contingents, the SPD and CSU. A large majority of the Council voted in favour of seriously addressing the construction of a new exhibition centre.²⁸ Councillor Friedrich Bergold mentioned the shared mission of “being able to do something big, not the everyday, for Nuremberg.”²⁹

The right site in eastern Nuremberg

A preliminary plan was prepared on the basis of detailed spatial and functional planning provided by Fritz Drescher (Messehallen GmbH, Spielwarenmesse eGmbH) and Helmuth Könicke (AFAG).³⁰ The city development office was brought in to review the suitability of various sites: the Wetzendorfer Espan, Marienberg, Zeppelinfeld, Liegnitzer Strasse, and Karl-Schönleben-Strasse.³¹ The comparison indicated that the area between Karl-Schönleben-Strasse, Münchener Strasse, Otto-Bärnreuther-Strasse, the Grosse Strasse, and the Silberbuck Hill was the most appropriate. There were good transportation connections to both downtown and the Autobahn, the underground was already under construction, and there was space for car parks. Most of the land was owned by the Bavarian State Forest Administration, which signalled its willingness to sell.³² The preliminary plans confirmed that the site was suitable. The journalists at the “Süddeutsche Zeitung” questioned whether Nuremberg needed “a new exhibition venue ... for its international Toy Fair.”

Critics conjectured “that in view of the considerable cost, profitability could never be expected”, and “development in the exhibitions industry [...] also [argues] against the possibility that other trade fairs can be attracted to Nuremberg.” But Nuremberg’s City Council was increasingly in the mood for new beginnings.³³ “We believed that a city like Nuremberg [...] – and Nuremberg has been a European city since the Middle Ages, a European city for trade and crafts – needs a strong trade fair organisation and a strong trade fair venue”, said Dr Oscar Schneider about this phase.³⁴ Finally, a unanimous resolution on 4 February 1970 ordered plans to proceed for a new exhibition centre on the land along Karl-Schönleben-Strasse.³⁵

Planning, financing, and settling the details

So now there was an answer to whether and where the new exhibition centre should be built. What was still unclear was how the immense cost of more than DM 100 million could be paid. It quickly became



Tradition alone will not be enough to preserve a trade fair venue. Because for the long term, only those trade fair sites survive that have excellent facilities.

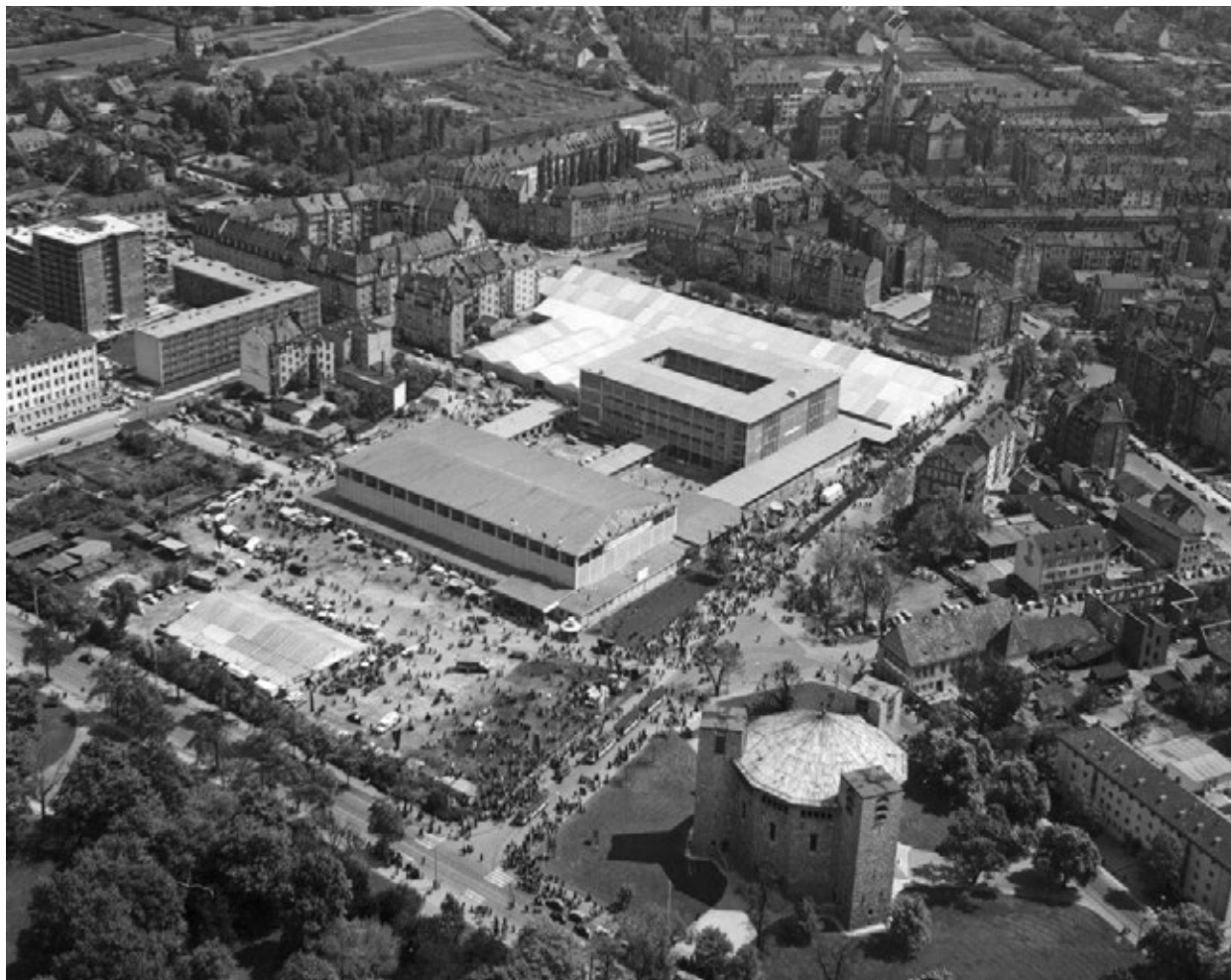


Dr Wilhelm Doni,
Economic Affairs
officer, City of
Nuremberg

evident that no financial commitment could be expected from the federal government. In its refusal in March 1970, the Ministry of the Economy explained that the federal government had not supported the expansion of any other trade fair sites, and that the principle of equal treatment forbade supporting the Nuremberg project.³⁶ But the Ministry said it was open to the possibility of providing indirect assistance with financing.

That left the officers at the city to apply all the more vigorously for financial aid from the Free State of Bavaria. They argued that the city would not be able to build a new, modern exhibition centre on its own, but that having Nuremberg as a modern trade fair hub would also have a positive impact on Bavaria as a whole as a business site.

They asked the State to donate the land and to subsidise the project financially, and also to invest as a shareholder of Messehallen GmbH. At the city’s Department of Economic Affairs, Dr Doni in particular urged the State’s Economy and Finance Ministry to lend generous support to the project.



From the very start, the city and the City Park meant there were limits on the space for the old exhibition site at Berliner Platz (shown here in 1956). A problem that was solved by building the new Exhibition Centre in Langwasser, opened in 1973.

Meanwhile, the powers that be in Nuremberg hoped to make the most of the prevailing broad approval, and they continued to push for the completion of the plans for the new exhibition centre.

The deadlines were ambitious: A multi-purpose hall would be ready to host the handball preliminaries for the 1972 Olympics. The opening of the 1973 international Spielwarenmesse was set as the completion date for the first phase of the Exhibition Centre. But the goal of at least hosting the Olympic preliminary rounds at the new hall would not be met. On 15 April 1970, the City Council decided to solicit five expert plans from well-known nationwide planning teams.³⁷ There was not enough time to issue a public call for an ideas contest; the timeline that the city had chosen was too tight. At a meeting on 14 September 1970, the jury unanimously approved the plans from "Planning Group III" headed by Plan GmbH München Gesellschaft für Regional-, Architektur und Ingenieurplanung. The main arguments for the recommendation were the plan's successful integration into the site's topography and the unusual architecture, whose polygonal outlines would set it apart from other exhibition halls.

The City Council unanimously approved the recommendation in a resolution on 30 September 1970.³⁸



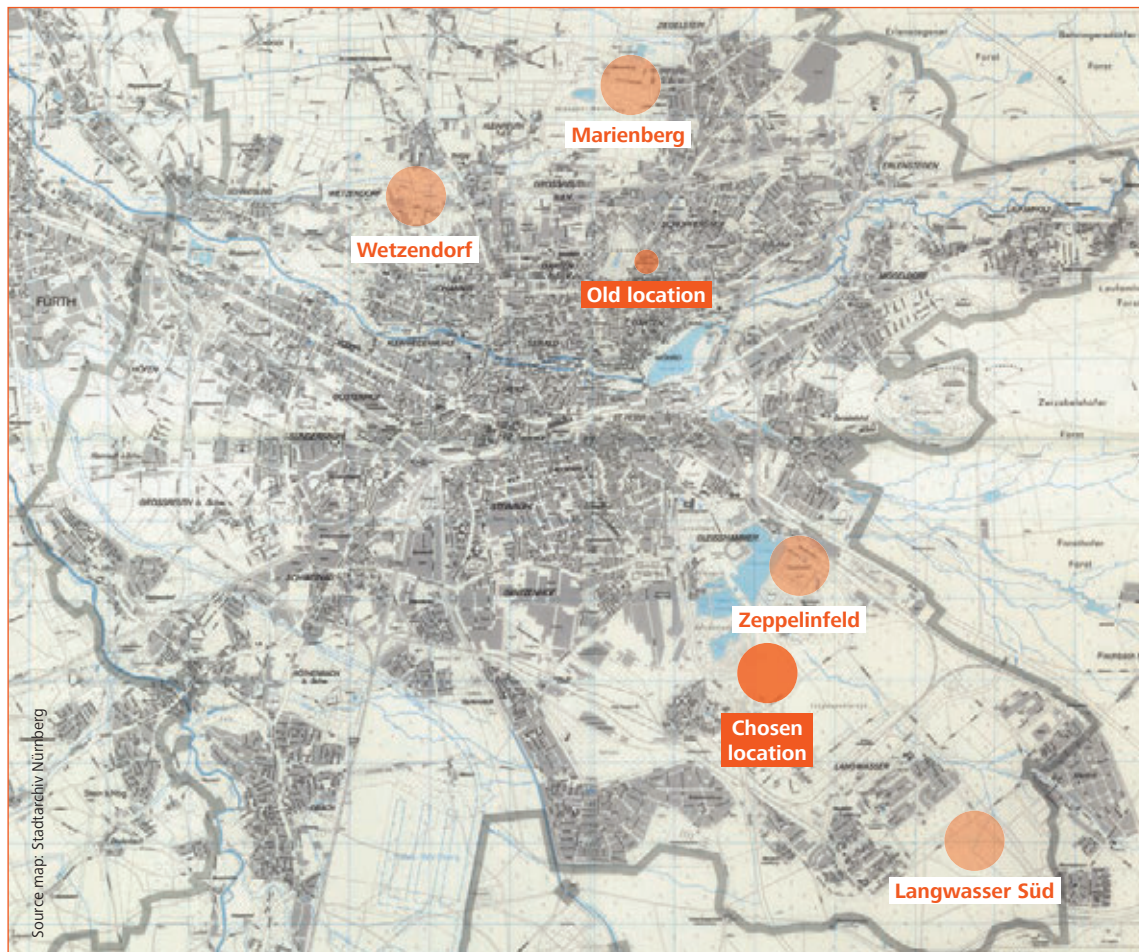
We believed that a city like Nuremberg ... – and Nuremberg has been a European city since the Middle Ages, a European city for trade and crafts – needs a strong trade fair organisation and a strong trade fair venue.



Dr Oscar Schneider, member of the Nuremberg City Council during the decision about the Exhibition Centre's site

Based on this specific plan, negotiations advanced with the Bavarian State government about support for the project. City Treasurer Hans Georg Schmitz was an especially strong supporter of Economic Affairs Officer Doni. In October 1970, the two were already able to report to the City Council that negotiations were proceeding well. Finally the State made an offer. To comply with all the legal requirements for a land transfer capable of serving as security for a loan, the City of Nuremberg would receive a grant for an amount equal to the value of the land needed for the exhibition site. With that money, Messehallen GmbH could officially purchase the site from the State.³⁹

The prospect of needs-based grants was also raised. But the Free State of Bavaria showed no interest in investing as a shareholder in Messehallen GmbH. With the land purchase now possible, a key step had been taken that allowed Nuremberg to begin carrying out its plans for the site.



The 1969 map shows the five sites under discussion for the new Exhibition Centre. Ultimately the choice went to the present location in Langwasser.