Designing One Nation

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From Competition to Cooperation

Cold War Diplomacy of German Design

When the West German embassies reopened in the early 1950s, countless perplexed letters from around the world arrived in Bonn. Staff requested guidance about what to do with emblems of the Third Reich. The embassy in Rio de Janeiro faced a peculiar conundrum in 1952, as it inherited a set of eagle-and-swastika-adorned silverware. Estimated at a value of DM 115,000, a lively letter exchange between the Rio embassy and the Federal Ministry for Foreign Affairs (Auswärtiges Amt, AA) developed about the NSDAP party symbol. Eventually it was decided that a local Brazilian jeweler should remove both eagle and swastika.

In varying geographical and geostrategic contexts, West German ambassadors learned quickly how central material representation of the new postfascist narrative of transparency and simplicity was to the country’s success abroad. This was particularly true when it came to the task of opening up export markets for engineering and consumer products with high added value, the core of the West German export industries. In countries where the Federal Republic’s trade consisted of mostly cheap products, tremendous efforts were made to improve the reputation of the German national brand. Ambassador Dr. von Hentig reported from Djakarta in 1953 that the embassy’s Mercedes 300 had been the single best investment for economic promotion activities, together with a modern sterling cutlery set made by the company C. Hugo Pott: “The cutlery has found highest admiration and acknowledgement among international and Indonesian-Dutch circles. It may be described without hesitation as the most beautiful, even far superior to President Sukarno’s state silver. . . . In this artistic accomplishment lies proof that we are not only technologically but also artistically superior.” His exchanges with the AA illustrate a high awareness of industrial design’s importance for economic relations among the diplomatic corps in the early years.
of the Federal Republic. For instance, von Hentig politely declined German textiles offered to him through AA contractors, as these could “not even compete with the quality of the most affordable of mass-produced hand-knotted Indian carpets and fabrics.” Instead, he preferred to furnish the representational spaces in the embassy with interior design solutions from the Vereinigte Werkstätten in Munich, the pre-1945 sister company of the Deutsche Werkstätten Hellerau (DWH) in Dresden, known for its modern and functional aesthetic. The embassy in Paris chose furniture designs from the Werkstätten as well, as they expressed a “dignified modesty.” The potentially positive effect of displayed humility and artistic excellence underpinned the diplomatic work that the AA began in an effort to reintegrate the Federal Republic into the world economy and, eventually, re-establish the country’s importance in international politics.

From the early days of the Federal Republic the symbolic significance of German materiality for foreign relations and trade was thus well understood. What is more, it became a medium through which diplomats communicated their anxieties about Germany’s past and their hopes for a better future based on mutually beneficial interests, such as trade and cultural exchange. Material cultural foreign policy became intrinsically linked to the economic culture of the home country, the structures, values, customs, skills, technologies, and materials visible in the products of German industry. In fact, the BDI and the German Industry and Commerce Board (Deutscher Industrie und Handelstag, DIHT) spearheaded West German foreign trade policy. In some cases they even preempted the reopening of official diplomatic relations with other countries to recommence foreign trade speedily. The two economic organizations coordinated their efforts to show a united front and aligned their ambitions with Adenauer’s foreign policy. They supported western integration and a confrontational Ost- and Deutschlandpolitik even if trade with the Eastern Bloc would have been lucrative.

These fundamentals complicated German-German relations during the Cold War, a piecemeal effort to “coexist” in a geopolitical situation marked by rising superpower tensions. Faced with deadlocked ideological positions, Germans eventually realized that they needed new ways to interact in order to salvage what was left of the cultural and economic bonds between them. Like economic reconstruction and intra-German trade, alternatives to eastern and western alignment were also explored in diplomatic usages of German material culture as both Germanys fiercely competed for legitimacy and recognition in the international arena. In the beginning, the Federal Republic shared its modern style in interior design with other members of the Atlantic community. Its fresh
and functional aesthetics placed West Germany among the advanced and progressive nations in the innovative fields of engineering, technology, and design. Meanwhile, cultural Stalinism of the 1940s and early 1950s, economic planning, and the politicization of product development delayed East Germany’s cultural aspirations until the mid-1960s. Impelled by the economic logic of export markets, the GDR eventually made progress in the production of modern furniture that was able to find customers in East and West. Thus, the research suggests that East and West German attempts at expressing ideological and systemic difference ironically created a shared code inscribed in material culture that would eventually further German-German rapprochement.

Within the bipolarity of the Cold War, the political significance of aesthetics in everyday objects has been well established. Taking the focus off the superpowers to interrogate the specifically German cultural politics behind the aestheticization of separate identities—proletarian in the East and cosmopolitan in the West—highlights German interests in the global Cold War. It is in the operationalization of industrial design for diplomatic purposes, in which economic culture and foreign policy directly connect. In order to show how material culture emerged as a recognizable language in the intra-German relationship and what functions it served, this chapter integrates the material with the diplomatic ambitions of the two German states. In this way, East and West German cultural-political strategies that sought to negotiate a German-German modus vivendi through the medium of domestic culture can be connected to the complex history of Cold War German diplomacy within the framework of international industrial design exhibitions, international design organizations, and direct German-German cultural exchanges. At the center stands the question of how both Germanys turned a competitive situation, the aestheticization of their respective political orders, into a diplomatic tool for rapprochement.

Part of what allowed material culture to mediate German-German relations was the deeply ingrained self-understanding of Germany as a “nation of culture” (Kulturnation) that survived the 1949 division. The term originated with early German conservatives who substituted the lack of a nation-state in the nineteenth century with the term Kulturnation to describe “one people united by custom, language, poetry and music, and a common tradition in which all these factors defined a unique German history.” Both sides utilized German aesthetic traditions to overcome or suppress the horrors of the Third Reich and employed them to display moral improvement. This operational understanding of aesthetics was the lowest common denominator upon which communication between the FRG and the GDR functioned. While both Germanys shared
one cultural heritage of Goethe, Beethoven, and Dürer, the ideological Cold War shifted focus from high culture to lifestyle and Wohnkultur. Industrial and product design, a material expression of progress and membership among modern nations, thus became an integral part of their competitive foreign relations efforts.

International Exhibitions and the Diplomatic Significance of Material Culture

Early in the 1950s, both Germanys established a tradition of competitive international industrial exhibitions. The aesthetic and artistic elements were underpinned by economic strategies and the search for international partners. In the 1960s, East and West German design councils began working toward establishing more formal relations with European nations on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Both German states aimed to demonstrate material progressivism and economic prowess to the opposing bloc. The lingering German Question and East Berlin’s legitimization efforts pitted East and West German material culture against each other.

Prior personal and professional friendships facilitated the Federal Republic’s entry into this new stage of Cold War design diplomacy. The general secretary of the RfF, Mia Seeger, together with her Polish counterpart, Zophia Szydlowska, the head of the design council Instytut Wzornictwa Przemysłowego, proposed the first exclusively West German industrial design exhibition in the Eastern Bloc. The two women had met at the 1960 Milan Triennial, where the German and Polish displays were adjacent. When Seeger saw the final blueprints for the exhibition space, she noticed a wall that separated the Polish exhibition from the German one. She immediately wrote to Szydlowska and put her disappointment about the Polish demarcation in the most diplomatic terms: “If I read your layout correctly, then you have erected a wall against the German section, your section against ours. This would greatly hinder the flow of visitors. In no way do we need a wall.” The wall was never again mentioned and a lifelong friendship between the two women ensued. In the following years, they made an invaluable contribution toward constructive East-West exchanges in industrial design. For instance, in 1965 Szydlowska informed Martin Kelm, the head of the East German ZfF, about the industrial design work done in West Germany. The friendship of Seeger and Szydlowska demonstrates how interpersonal relations effected links across the Iron Curtain many years before Chancellor Willy Brandt’s New Eastern Policy initiated official reconciliation with Poland.
In 1967, the RfF organised “Industrial Design from the FRG,” the first West German industrial exhibition to travel the Eastern Bloc since 1949. It stopped in the Polish cities of Warsaw and Krakow first, and then moved on to Sofia in Bulgaria, and Zagreb in Yugoslavia. The RfF promoted this event as part of a series of Western European and Scandinavian exhibitions that visited the Eastern Bloc. Yet considering Germany’s special position in Cold War Europe, it took particular “cautious and balanced good will” on all sides to make this project happen. Once the exhibition opened its doors to Polish visitors, aspects specific to the Federal Republic’s relations with the East surfaced. The underlying message of the show was that of Western abundance and technical superiority, consistent with western Cold War cultural diplomacy. In a design journal review, Peter Frank, an exhibition supervisor and staff member close to Mia Seeger, reported his uneasiness regarding the excitement that Polish visitors expressed when seeing the exhibition objects: “As exhibition custodian, I receive the admiration of visitors with somewhat ambivalent feelings. The exhibition is more than simply a specific design show.” And he elaborated: “It is, like every other documentation of a country’s national design standards, understood as a representation in its broadest sense. Perhaps design exhibitions are especially fitting for this purpose, particularly if they make evident that industrial design expresses more than just the immediate technological and economic level.”

Frank only realized the show’s combined effect of abundance and technological advancement once it was on display. He also noted that the West German products either were complete novelties in Poland or representative of a different economic and social context. For example, a bachelor kitchenette embodied a particular Western lifestyle, whereas from a communist viewpoint, it must have seemed like a waste of resources for a social oddity.

Two incidents heightened the diplomatic payoff West Germany derived from this event. First, GDR industrial designers scheduled a visit to Poland for one of their regular bilateral exchanges during the two-week period of the FRG exhibition in Warsaw. This afforded East German designers the opportunity to acquaint themselves with West German products that they had before only seen in print. West Germany, meanwhile, could once again show off its superiority in product design. While the unexpected visit from the GDR delegation surely gave great satisfaction to the RfF, the friendship between Seeger and Szydlowska yielded an even bigger success for West German diplomacy. After the show’s opening in 1967, Szydlowska organized a dinner party to honor her dear German friend, to which the Federal Republic’s chargé d’affairs in Poland was invited—his first official invitation to a Polish event. With this exhibition the Federal
Republic not only showcased its material culture but also made an important step toward rebuilding diplomatic relations in the Eastern Bloc.\textsuperscript{20} West Germany’s activities in the Eastern Bloc triggered East German anxieties about its own reputation as the most technologically advanced industrial country in the Soviet sphere of influence. To be trumped by Bonn in the realm of product design and consumer culture in front of its socialist friends, as East German politicians feared, could potentially lead to a loss of prestige in the COMECON. Within months of the West German traveling exhibition, the ZfF hastily put together its own exhibition to feature GDR state-of-the-art interior design. The show \textit{Function—Shape—Quality} traveled through the Eastern Bloc for two years, imitating the route of the West German exhibition by starting in Warsaw and then progressing to Krakow. The ZfF modeled the size and concept of the exhibition after what the Federal Republic had presented just months earlier.\textsuperscript{21} Instead of stressing difference and superiority, as the Federal Republic’s exhibition had done, the GDR attempted to win over their Polish audiences with a message of solidarity.\textsuperscript{22} Positioning industrial design as a common challenge for all socialist nations, the GDR sought to appeal to mutual interests in the ideological and practical problem-solving process within the COMECON. The exhibition’s intended audience, however, included professionals beyond the Eastern Bloc, as invitations were sent to numerous Western design councils and design schools.\textsuperscript{23} Consequently, this exhibition aimed to declare the state of industrial design in the GDR—in practice and theory—to both friend and foe, as well as signal the GDR’s commonalities with other socialist nations, where it subsequently toured.

As the title \textit{Function—Shape—Quality} suggests, the show’s focus linked aesthetics to functionality. It was the first GDR display to feature design as an important quality of industrial production. It thus expressed the consumer turn in East German economic policy, which led planners and designers to pay more attention to the relationship between humans and their material environment. More than 150 objects and group exhibits, thirty photographic displays, and eight models provided a comprehensive overview of contemporary East German industrial design.\textsuperscript{24} Visitors were greeted by an introductory display that covered German design history between 1900 and 1933. The timeline omitted the Nazi period in accordance with the foundational myth of the GDR, which emphasized a clear break with the Third Reich.\textsuperscript{25} The next part of the exhibition introduced the German arts and crafts tradition and provided an overview of current design education in the GDR. The rest of the exhibition addressed significant aesthetic challenges in socialist societies: design solutions that “integrated the
cultural and the utility value of the product” for work environments, domestic spaces, and leisure, reflecting the state-dominated life of the socialist citizen.26

The show’s ideological component was especially apparent in the accompanying catalog. It explained the role design ought to play in socialist societies: “The world that humans shape has a shaping influence on them in return. The properties, benefits, and shapes of man-made objects stimulate people’s behavior and relationship to the world.” This stimulation would result from “usage, that is the experience of the objects’ material, construction, and function, which come together in the design, leads in the end to the unlocking [of] new human senses and to the activation of satisfaction, pleasure, and joy of living.”27 Although the explanation may sound like a definition of hedonistic consumption, the relationship between humans and their material environment was central to the mid-1960s understanding of production and consumption in the GDR. The idea of “humanistic socialism” put humans at the center of design, with the goal of creating an environment that served the needs of the population. The degree to which a product fulfilled these needs determined its ideological value.

Generally speaking, the catalog revised many of the more extreme ideological stances that the GDR had taken in the 1950s and early 1960s. The historical section even exonerated the Bauhaus, which had been erased from East Germany cultural memory during the Formalism Debate between 1950 and 1953. Instead of the previous official critique labeling Weimar modernism as cosmopolitan and formalist, by 1967 the ZfF had crowned the Bauhaus the highest developmental stage among a series of design initiatives coming from the East German territory. The catalog text for the Function—Shape—Quality exhibition in Moscow two years later even integrated the Bauhaus into leftist, that is, socialist, opposition to the Hitler regime, pointing out that the Nazis closed down the design school as a “hotbed of cultural Bolshevism.”28 One of the pieces displayed, Horn’s modular furniture program MDW, epitomized the newfound sense of modernist tradition and a humanistic outlook on production, as it allowed consumers to accommodate individual needs of their changing personal as well as spatial living situations by adding on.

Polish media extensively advertised the show during its run from 11 December 1967 until 20 January 1968, and numerous Polish politicians and designers visited the displays. Newspaper reviews reveal that the exhibition’s novelty, unlike its West German counterpart, was not the display of unfamiliar products, since East German products were mostly available on the Polish market. Rather, the fascination lay with the display’s explanation of the development of a design culture and its subsequent appropriation by industry.29 The integration of design
into the economic planning process, epitomized by the ZfF’s 1965 relocation from the Ministry of Culture to the DAMW, was especially admired by the Polish press. At the specialist symposia framing the exhibition, GDR representatives emphasized the economic benefits of functionalist industrial design, while the catalogs stressed its cultural value. The crucial takeaway from the industrial exhibition was the GDR’s move toward resolving the evident contradiction between the ideological superstructure and its practical application inherent in the economic culture of the 1950s and early 1960s.

The mid-1960s then were a moment in which the GDR revised its ideological position vis-à-vis functionalism in its cultural diplomacy. After a decade of aesthetic divergence from the West and internal political contradiction, ideology and social considerations surrounding industrial design merged in humanistic socialism. The new interest in individual needs increasingly paved the way for consumer-oriented design and the rediscovery of Weimar modernism as a leftist aesthetic. This rehabilitation of the Bauhaus tradition in East Germany signaled once more the GDR’s commitment to artistic and economic competition with the Federal Republic. The demise of socialist realism in the East occurred alongside the crisis of functionalism in the West. At the same time, individual solutions, such as the MDW furniture program, enabled increasing standardization of production, which in turn helped preserve resources. Yet, the mismanagement of the planned economy would eventually ruin this moment of convergence. As a result, the GDR remained an “economy of scarcity,” in which consumers waited for years to attain coveted furniture, cars, and other technical equipment.30

To claim a place among modern industrialized nations, the next logical step for the GDR was to show its design expertise in Western countries, facilitated by membership in the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID). After earlier positive experiences with the UK, East Germany strove to formalize sporadic and unofficial bilateral cultural and economic relations with Great Britain on the way toward full diplomatic recognition.31 British companies had regularly participated in the Leipzig Fair in the 1960s and, pursued by GDR diplomats of the MfAA, representatives of British industry, the media, and the two major political parties had visited East Berlin.32 A parliamentary friendship group with Labour MPs had existed since 1962, yet its members mostly hailed from the left wing of the party.33 In the international spirit of détente in 1969 the British industry organization CBI and the GDR chamber of foreign commerce signed an initial trade agreement for the years 1970 to 1973. Diplomats worked with the British public relations company Lex Hornsby to promote recognition of the GDR and convey information to support this effort to British
newspapers. In addition, a number of cultural exchange events were scheduled, among them UK tours for some of the GDR’s finest artistic institutions, such as the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra and the East Berlin’s Komische Oper. It became evident that industrial circles were more receptive to establishing contacts with the GDR than their political counterparts.

In an effort to merge political and economic aims, the MfAA commissioned the ZfF in 1970 to put on an industrial design exhibition in London. By displaying products that fulfilled the highest international standards of quality and design with clear usage of GDR insignia, the exhibition planners aimed to impress characteristics of their socialist economy on the British public. What seemed like a straightforward event, however, demanded much diplomatic skill. At first, the general idea of a GDR design exhibition found fertile ground in England. Sir Paul Reilly, the head of the British Council of Industrial Design (CoID) and an active member of ICSID, supported the ZfF and even visited East Berlin in April 1970. The difficulties arose over an exhibition venue. The location had to be humble enough to avoid the impression that the British government entertained quasi-official relations with the socialist GDR, but also a sufficiently representative space not to offend the East German guests. In the end, the Ceylon Tea Center, a Sri Lankan trade forum, served as the exhibition space.

The diplomatic intricacies did not end there. Upon receiving the texts for the placards and the catalog, both loaded with socialist ideologisms, Sir Paul Reilly retracted his agreement to personally open the exhibition. From the outset, he had made it clear that he “was happy to open an exhibition which was entirely on the subject of Design and did not contain any political or ideological allusions, however slight.” As head of a government-supported organization, he did not want to be involved with an ideologically inscribed event, he insisted. If the GDR wanted him back on board, Sir Paul Reilly demanded that the ZfF revise the texts.

From this point, opinions within East German official circles sharply diverged. Designers feared that “the revisions would mean abandonment of our socialist point of view.” The DAMW, the ZfF’s superior governmental institution, pointed to the possibility that others, especially West German officials, could use such altered texts politically against the GDR. The diplomats of the MfAA, on the other hand, preferred changing the texts to losing Sir Paul Reilly’s endorsement, which “would hence represent an important precedent for future activities toward the GDR’s diplomatic recognition by Great Britain.” This stance was in line with GDR foreign policy in the final months of the Ulbricht era, which introduced a cautious opening up to the West from 1970 onward.
Although coordinated with the Soviet Union, Ulbricht’s foreign policy maxim of the GDR as the model socialist state, had, with its ambition of an independent Deutschlandpolitik, contradicted Soviet western strategy. It was abandoned in recognition of the GDR’s geostrategic position and the responsibility this entailed for the country’s leadership in East-West rapprochement. In the end, potential diplomatic gains won out over ideological concerns. The ZfF entirely revised the texts and thus gave the presentation of socialist material culture new meaning, one that catered to Western European sensibilities about individuality and that erased any trace of open state socialism from the displays. Original text was phrased as such:

New standards for the quality of industrial products are derived from the development of the socialist order in the GDR. Manufactures are an essential part of our environment. They influence people’s way of living within every area. The quality of material and ideological needs also depend on product design.

The revised, English translation purged the Marxist language from the texts:

New standards of quality have been set for industrial products. It is recognized that as an essential part of our environment these influence man in all spheres of his life. Ideally, every product should be an expression of certain requirements, both physical and aesthetic.

When the exhibition opened, it underscored the humanistic aspects of GDR design culture. This new stance was further underlined by Martin Kelm’s remarks at the show’s opening: “It is the goal in our society to positively influence all of the factors affecting human beings and to create an environment in which one can experience the challenging notion of humanism.” Yet Kelm used his speech also to reinsert ideological messages with a socialist interpretation of humanism:

As you know, we abolished the hurdles of private ownership of property as well as means of production in order to undertake planning that serves across societal interests. The people own everything. The people can determine their own fortunes. Hence, we have the potential to design an environment that serves the people’s interests. We work on utilizing these opportunities and on putting industrial design to work in creating a complexly designed humanistic environment.
The re-inscription of GDR material culture as an expression of humanistic ideals within socialism was a watershed moment in East Germany’s cultural and trade diplomacy: For the first time, political goals became more important than ideological consistency. With this newfound pragmatism with regard to the neoliberal free trade doctrine, the SED sought to combat the stigma of isolation and provincialism that had attached to the country after the construction of the Wall.⁴⁸

Having appeared in the catalog for the 1967 Warsaw exhibition, the concept of humanism in communism was not entirely new. As a shared concern, it facilitated communication between Eastern Bloc countries at different stages of socialist and industrial development; though in London the ZfF employed it to sway Western audiences. Indeed, in the mid-1960s, “socialist humanism” became a key term in the rapprochement of eastern and western Marxists.⁴⁹ This school of Marxist thought opposed the structural mechanisms of state socialism and instead emphasized subjectivity and human agency in socialist theory, and aimed at creating social alliances to win support for reform. Yet using humane socialism to mitigate the ideological opposition between Western democracies and socialist groups, parties, and even states, announced a new stage in diplomatic cultural exchange. It also contributed to a period of Western Eurocommunism in the 1960s and 1970s by enabling the cooperation of bourgeois and leftist parties in Western democratic governments, such as the Labour governments in Britain and the Grand Coalition in West Germany.⁵⁰

At the London exhibition, the GDR thus strategically employed the concept of humane socialism to overcome the ideological barrier. To convey this approach materially, the exhibition consciously minimized the better-developed heavy industrial sector and instead displayed consumer products that related to the everyday.⁵¹ It especially featured objects for leisure activities, such as patio furniture and toys. An East German review mentioned that the toys are “not only very well designed, but also pedagogically valuable and fulfill therapeutic requirements. The colorful, imaginatively arranged, and multiform toys bestow the entire exhibition with a friendly and casual atmosphere.”⁵² East German products ranging from pictures of heavy work equipment to displays of prized china and glassware created the impression of a progressive material culture. Yet visitors saw more than industrial design. GDR literature and picture albums strategically placed throughout the exhibit for perusal conveyed a better understanding of the socialist country.⁵³ A color slide presentation about Karl-Marx-Stadt’s postwar reconstruction (today Chemnitz) brought all these elements together and transported visitors to an ideal socialist setting where public
buildings, public art, the health establishment, and urban infrastructure neatly coalesced. Apparently, the message resonated positively with British audiences. On 9 September 1970, even the conservative *Daily Telegraph* titled its story on the GDR design exhibition “Humane East Germans.”

In the end, the response to the London exhibition far exceeded the hopes and expectations of diplomats in the GDR. Representatives from several eastern European countries, as well as the cultural attaché of the American embassy in London and a few members of British parliament, among other London notables, attended the opening reception. In his speech, Sir Paul Reilly affirmed the bilateral interest in fostering trade relations between Great Britain and the GDR “whether officially or unofficially.” Not to take advantage of this sizable market, he maintained, “would be ludicrous for a trading people like the British.” Yet he acknowledged the unusual diplomatic situation, hoping that “no-one here feels any compunction about being present to wish this exhibition well. It is indeed innocent self-interest that brings us all together here, since trade is properly a two-way traffic and cannot be conducted without reasonable personal contacts.” Once ideology was set aside, economic interests prevailed. With this event, the GDR moved one step closer to losing pariah status and becoming a desired trade partner.
The exhibition lasted from 7 to 19 September 1970, and was a great success for GDR foreign policy. There were 1067 visitors who signed a guest book, but a CoID report suspected that more people actually saw the show. Visitors nominated the tea china, glassware, and toys as their favorite objects on display. They also commented on the high quality of GDR design and the sophistication of the exhibition system. Many agreed that there was much more to learn about the GDR and wanted to deepen relations with the country. Major design organizations in England proved receptive and invited the GDR delegation to talks. The final ZfF report showed great satisfaction with the way the exhibition demonstrated East German capabilities in the field of industrial design and concluded that this contributed tremendously to GDR diplomacy.

Encounters of Foreign Design: The Tug-of-War over ICSID Membership

The adversarial nature of East and West German cultural diplomacy over industrial design also preoccupied the ICSID. Founded in 1957 out of several industrial design congresses, the ICSID was an organization dedicated to globally advancing and organizing the new professional field of industrial design. Initial members included Denmark, the FRG, France, India, Italy, Japan, Norway, Sweden, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The ICSID quickly became the dominant body defining the profession, finding solutions to contemporary design problems, and setting standards for industrial design education. Its first president, Peter Muller-Munk from the United States, called it “a fine display of transatlantic community and un-selfish professional co-operation.” According to his successor Sir Misha Black, officeholders were highly aware that as a nonpolitical professional organization it could play a part in bridging the bipolarity of the Cold War: “Those who will not associate politically are able to meet and talk at the ICSID Assemblies and Conferences.” This awareness translated into an inclusive member acquisition policy across the Iron Curtain.

ICSID's eastward expansion emulated a pattern seen in several nongovernmental cultural organizations vying for the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) status in the 1960s. Nonaligned Yugoslavia became the first socialist member of the ICSID in 1961, followed by the Soviet Union's All-Union Scientific Research Institute of Industrial Design (VNIITE) as the first Eastern Bloc country in 1965. The novelty of eastward expansion both encouraged Western members to protest on political and technical grounds while the Eastern Bloc members prepared for possible diplomatic
fallout and sabotage attempts. A particular concern for ICSID was that Eastern Bloc design councils were often state institutions and not professional associations. Yuri Soloviev, the head of VNIITE, sent the ICSID executive board a long appraisal of the role of industrial design in socialist societies, explaining how the state centrally organized the profession. Despite some initial hesitation on part of the ICSID board, the desire to grow from a transatlantic into a global organization won out over concerns about the nature of the new member societies. To enable national members in addition to professional associations to join the organization, the ICSID constitution was changed, eventually allowing most eastern European industrial design institutions to be admitted. The same applied to the ZfF when it requested membership at the Vienna Congress in 1965. However, the existence of two Germanys complicated this request.

On 9 January 1965, Mia Seeger received a “strictly confidential” letter from her Belgian colleague Josine des Cressonnières. The ICSID secretary general inquired whether Seeger had heard of the ZfF in Berlin, which had approached her about ICSID membership. Des Cressonnières did not know whether the ZfF was located in East or West Berlin and relied on her German friend for information. This rather innocuous letter initiated a two-and-a-half-year-long West German campaign to prevent the GDR from joining the ICSID.

A founding member, the West German RfF had acted as the sole representative of German interests in ICSID since 1957. With ICSID’s pending extension into the Eastern Bloc, the worlds of Cold War diplomacy and cultural politics collided. The campaign to isolate the GDR aligned with the Federal Republic’s Deutschlandpolitik and Cold War foreign policy of nonrecognition regarding the eastern part of Germany. The Hallstein Doctrine prescribed the severing of diplomatic relations with countries that extended diplomatic recognition to the GDR and affirmed the West German claim to sole representation (Alleinvertretungsanspruch) for all of Germany in international organizations. The concern was that German-German interaction would become official if the ZfF were to gain ICSID membership. It would take place within an international organization that accepted representatives from diplomatically recognized countries, which would force West Germany to share German representation with East Germans. It was feared that this would open doors to increasing international integration in other contexts and eventually pave the way to recognition of the GDR as a sovereign state. It was thus important, western officials argued, to shut this down. West German professional and academic organizations received recommendations of how to perpetuate the GDR’s international nonrecognition at international congresses from the West German Foreign Ministry (AA). For
instance, before any congress or meeting, professional organizations should ensure that the term “GDR” did not find its way into the event program. Both East and West German participants should be listed simply with “Germany” as their country of origin.\textsuperscript{70} International organizations, the advice circular maintained, needed to be informed that the separate recognition of the GDR by name or, even worse, through independent membership would profoundly undermine desired intra-German cooperation on both the professional and the interpersonal level.

Mia Seeger’s successor as general secretary of the RfF, Fritz Gotthelf, intensified the campaign to reject the East Germans after the ICSID executive committee had passed the GDR’s application in February 1967 for confirmation by the General Assembly in Canada.\textsuperscript{71} He turned to the Executive Committee, explaining once more the delicate German political situation and the diplomatic importance of West Germany’s \textit{Alleinvertretungsanspruch}, but to no avail. While the ICSID executives acknowledged the tenuous relations, they had neither the interest nor the power to challenge the Cold War status quo of German division. In July 1967, a few weeks before the Ottawa Congress, Gotthelf received a confidential letter from Des Cressonnières, stating that, after careful consideration, the board had decided to grant East Germany full membership. Almost humorously, she reported that “the Executive Committee has concluded that it was not possible to come to a decision, against all existing facts, about the re-unification of Germany!”\textsuperscript{72} Des Cressonnières ended by pointing to a precedent in which ICSID had already granted provisional membership to a design society from the People’s Republic of China and advised that it ought to extend the same to the East German ZfF. In face of this, Gotthelf could do little but accept the ICSID’s decision. After more than two years of string-pulling and backdoor diplomacy, he downplayed the importance of the matter in his response: “One Germany or two; we aren’t politicians.” Nevertheless, Gotthelf announced that West Germany would abstain from the vote on East Germany’s membership “in an elegant manner” by being absent from the Canada congress.\textsuperscript{73} This last-minute effort to save face could not conceal that the Federal Republic and its ICSID representatives had suffered a significant blow in the struggle for sole German representation in international bodies.

As the West Germans pushed forward their last intervention against GDR membership in the summer of 1967, tensions between the ZfF and the ICSID executive committee rose as well. From the very beginning, the GDR had taken a “no nonsense” approach to West German attempts to exclude them from this organization. Having encountered the Federal Republic’s \textit{Alleinvertretungsanspruch} in other international bodies, the SED leadership suspected western
conspiracy behind the smallest diplomatic slip-up, and East Berlin became adamant about the correct representation of its country in name, flag, and national anthem.\textsuperscript{74} When the program for the ICSID Congress in Ottawa failed to identify the ZfF as an East German institution, Martin Kelm threatened to boycott the congress altogether.\textsuperscript{75} Des Cressonnières tried to calm the situation by assuring him that the membership nomination of the ZfF would be listed with the addendum “German Democratic Republic (GDR).”\textsuperscript{76}

What might seem like an unnecessary escalation actually represented a fundamental building block of GDR foreign policy to gain formal recognition as a legitimate state from the West. Membership in nongovernmental international organizations moved the country closer to attaining a seat at the United Nations. Moreover, as the tug-of-war over ICSID membership shows, both Germans knew that each of these incidents raised the stakes in the German-German Cold War over ideology, division, and international recognition. Eventually the ZfF gained membership at the Ottawa Congress, along with the institutes of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria, leveling the diplomatic playing field between eastern and western Europe for the industrial design profession.\textsuperscript{77} In fact, a decade later during the Soviet ICSID presidency under Soloviev, it would be the West Germans who complained that their country had been labeled incorrectly as “German Federal Republic” and who would request a correction to the official and UN-recognized “Federal Republic of Germany” in all ICSID documents and papers.\textsuperscript{78} This may well have been a squabble over alphabetical order, since the German Democratic Republic would of course appear before the “German Federal Republic” in any listing of members.

That East German cultural diplomacy actually worked was proven by a sudden spike of western interest in GDR design after its acceptance into the ICSID. West German diplomatic circles were not at all pleased with this outcome, but the industrial design community embraced it. *Form*, a leading design publication with significant influence on aesthetic discourse in the Federal Republic, welcomed this as a blessing in disguise as “the membership of the GDR in the ICSID might perhaps offer more opportunities for knowledge exchange.”\textsuperscript{79} Another article in *Form* recognized the leading East German design publication *Form und Zweck* “as an auxiliary bridge to compensate for the lack of personal exchange of experiences between East and West.”\textsuperscript{80} While other national design traditions were covered, the journal had largely ignored GDR design for the better part of a decade. This international validation redeemed GDR design in the eyes of West German designers. However, the East German turn toward modern idioms in the mid-1960s no doubt propelled this new interest as well.
Nonetheless, the ICSID mediated exchange did not mean that German-German interaction became less confrontational after 1967. In 1968, for instance, the BMWi supported the then-flailing RfF in building a design center in West Berlin, which remained politically contested territory. The GDR protested the center, which it understood to be a government institution, but of course had no power to block it. When in 1969 the RfF suggested an ICSID expert meeting at the new International Design Centre (IDZ) in West Berlin, Kelm declined the invitation from Des Cressonnières. He reasoned that “the fact that recent official efforts on part of the West German Federal Republic to support industrial design are to be implemented of all places in West Berlin, that is outside the borders of the West German state, can only be interpreted as a political act against the GDR.” Des Cressonnières, in turn, told the RfF that she had foreseen such complications: “I must admit there is some truth in it…. I told Philip Rosenthal when I saw him: ‘Why choose Berlin? It will create difficulties.’” The ICSID executive board quickly found a diplomatic solution and asked Kelm to arrange a visit to the AiF in East Berlin for one of the days of the expert meeting, a request with which he happily complied.

Diplomacy of German Design: The German-German Basic Treaty

These events demonstrate that industrial designers from both Germanys could not interact easily as long as confrontation dominated Cold War foreign policy. In the absence of official political relations, professional exchanges were seen as part of the struggle for hearts and minds and therefore intrinsically tied to cultural diplomacy. As the general Cold War climate moved from deterrence to dialogue in the late 1960s, the situation slowly changed. Intertwined with détente processes in superpower relations was the ongoing issue of the national status of a divided country and its diplomatic recognition.

In a first step, Chancellor Willy Brandt who had opened up West German diplomacy to negotiations with the Eastern Bloc in his prior position as minister of foreign affairs, intensified these efforts after his election in 1969. Brandt’s Neue Ostpolitik revised the previous “policy of strength” that the conservative Adenauer and Erhard governments had followed. Adenauer especially had been convinced that West Germany’s rearmament, NATO membership, and economic cooperation in western Europe would inevitably lead the Federal Republic from strength to strength and, more importantly, safeguard it from communist political influence and Soviet expansionism or military aggression.
Western integration, however, only deepened German division, and Adenauer knew this.\textsuperscript{87} By 1969, the formula “reunification through Western integration,” the idea that a politically and economically strong Federal Republic would “attract” East Germany into reunification, had not worked. The Wall stood as a reminder of the limits of Adenauer’s strategy.

The construction of the Berlin Wall had taught Brandt, at the time the mayor of West Berlin, important lessons, among them the realization that “the West alone would not solve the problems of German division.”\textsuperscript{88} Negotiations over minor agreements, such as the 1963 special pass agreement for West Berliners to see East Berlin family for holidays impressed on him and his advisor Egon Bahr the importance of dialogue and exchange with the GDR. Improving relations with the Soviet Union was an important step toward German-German political rapprochement. In the absence of a peace treaty following the Second World War, postwar Germany’s former eastern territories had remained a point of contention in Soviet–West German relations. Under the auspices of Brandt’s policy of rapprochement, Bonn affirmed the eastern German border, the Oder-Neisse-Line, in 1970 in the Moscow Treaty with the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Treaty with Poland, and renounced any claim to former German territories. The two treaties enabled the Federal Republic to continue to pursue an eastern foreign policy separately from their transatlantic partners, especially the United States. Egon Bahr summarized Bonn’s new strategy in the German Question: “Responsibility for Germany had to be borne by Germans themselves.”\textsuperscript{89}

The ultimate goal of Brandt’s \textit{Ostpolitik} was indeed to re-establish some kind of national context for the two German states.\textsuperscript{90} It was therefore crucial “to restore at least some aspects of the pre–World War II links between the two halves of Germany.”\textsuperscript{91} In this way, his policy diverged from superpower détente, because it sought to change the Cold War status quo. To realize the eastern policy regarding East Germany, Brandt needed greater independence from external powers “to create living conditions far better than those enforced by Cold War rivalries.”\textsuperscript{92} After twenty years, the Federal Republic thus gave up its foreign policy maxim of \textit{Alleinvertretungsanspruch}, abolished the Hallstein Doctrine, and entered into official negotiations with the other part of Germany.\textsuperscript{93}

The superpowers on both sides had mixed feelings about this German-German rapprochement. On the one hand, the Germans had to find a way to coexist, but on the other hand, the possibility of German unification under the umbrella of the opposing system, or even a neutral Germany released from any binding partnerships, presented a scenario that neither side wanted. Washington was especially nervous about the degree of independence displayed by West German
diplomats and their willingness to cooperate with Soviet diplomats in order to achieve their political goals. Moscow was less nervous about the GDR leadership, especially after the transition from the obstinate Ulbricht to the more pliant Honecker, whom it kept on a short leash throughout the negotiation process.\textsuperscript{94} The Soviet Union supported the normalization of German-German relations as far as it fit with the overall détente and economic policy interests of the Bloc leader.\textsuperscript{95} While the superpowers saw German division as a means for maintaining peace in Europe, Germans argued with increasing intensity that the division was a major cause of tension.\textsuperscript{96}

As the Moscow and Warsaw treaties awaited ratification in the West German parliament, and the Four Power Agreement on Berlin had just been signed, direct talks between East and West Germany commenced.\textsuperscript{97} After finalizing the Transit Accord and the Traffic Treaty, which established regulations for the passage of West German citizens and goods through the GDR, negotiations about more substantial issues began in the summer of 1972: the national question, the absence of a peace treaty and the presence of the Four Powers, and the question of citizenship. Both sides signed the Basic Treaty that December after curtailed negotiations left some of the issues unresolved. Over the next two decades, the Federal Republic would spend millions for the Transit Accord annually, which included visa charges and tariffs. Bonn would also pay more than DM 3.5 billion to free roughly 34,000 political prisoners and reunite approximately 250,000 families divided by the Wall.\textsuperscript{98}

West German willingness to pay enormous sums for the transit regulations highlights Bonn’s efforts to ameliorate interpersonal relations between the East and West German populations. It also demonstrated a new attitude toward the German Question by accepting the realities of the division.\textsuperscript{99} At the core of this policy lay the hope that increased interaction between East and West would reignite feelings of national unity, lead to the demise of the GDR, and end German division.\textsuperscript{100} However, the SED completely controlled contacts between their population and the West: Visas required a complicated application process, packages and mail from the West were searched, and, as Stasi files later revealed, western visitors were monitored for the majority of their stay in the East. The Brandt government, on the one hand, attempted to reach an agreement that deregulated human interaction and limited institutional or official interference in order to break down the literal and figurative walls that the SED had erected between people who shared cultural and political roots. The Honecker government, on the other hand, continued its approach to the German division via demarcation policies.\textsuperscript{101}
The specifics of German-German cultural exchanges agreed upon in the Basic Treaty, namely the Cultural Accord (*Kulturabkommen*), provide an excellent window into the diplomatic efforts to “normalize” East-West relations on both sides. They also reveal West Germany’s long-term goal for Ostpolitik deregulating cultural exchange by allowing nonstate actors to initiate and conduct cultural events on the other side of the border.\(^\text{102}\) Beginning in 1974, the West German Permanent Representative Mission (StäV) in East Berlin, which the Federal Republic had set up instead of an embassy in the aftermath of the Basic Treaty, functioned as a mediator for political issues, economic cooperation, and cultural contacts concerning both parts of Germany. Yet negotiations over the *Kulturabkommen* remained unresolved for twelve years.\(^\text{103}\) The initial five rounds of talks between 1973 and 1975 brought no results because the GDR claimed ownership of cultural artifacts that the Federal Republic had included in a new cultural foundation.\(^\text{104}\) East Germany also contested the inclusion of West Berlin in the *Kulturabkommen*. Together, these issues brought deliberations to a halt until 1982.\(^\text{105}\) As an interim solution, both Germanys agreed on the state-mediated cultural exchange to enable mutual visits of theater companies, choirs, and museum exhibitions.

The disagreements not only stemmed from the hasty and incomplete negotiations over the Basic Treaty but also from the souring German-German relations in the aftermath of the 1975 Helsinki Accords. Suddenly, the GDR reversed its strategy from dialogue to delineation, as “internal problems increased under the influence of détente” and GDR citizens, encouraged by the Helsinki human rights stipulations, began to reject the socialist system openly.\(^\text{106}\) Frustrated by the East German change of course, Bonn insisted on continuing the “policy of normalization.”\(^\text{107}\) Meanwhile, the interim solution of state-regulated cultural exchanges suited the GDR well. With the cultural accords in limbo, the SED maintained control over contacts between East and West and did not shy away from leveraging this power to complicate cultural exchange whenever Cold War tensions flared. The Federal Republic, alternately, participated in the state-mediated cultural exchanges because it saw them as an opportunity to reconnect with the other Germany and to shape East German perceptions of the Federal Republic. Eventually, Honecker dropped East Berlin’s unresolved claims to artifacts to the bottom of the negotiation list in order to recommence talks in 1983. After twelve more rounds, negotiations successfully concluded with the signing of the *Kulturabkommen* on 6 May 1986.

West German public discontent with the *Kulturabkommen* certainly grew over the negotiation period. The most prominent critic of the treaty was Nobel
Prize–winning author and artist Günter Grass. In a newspaper interview with the Rheinischer Merkur, Grass criticized the diplomatic aspect of the agreement because it was negotiated as if the two Germanys were foreign territory to each other, like a treaty with France or Finland. He warned that the Federal Republic gave up the last piece of commonality between East and West and insisted that “the agreement should have been made on the basis of a shared culture and history.” The political and economic division had long been established, but the realm of culture had proven resistant to division, he maintained. The agreement, in Grass’s opinion, put survival of a shared German culture into question. Grass had previously approached the federal government with his concerns about the Kulturabkommen’s potentially damaging effects. As an alternative, he suggested a German-German national foundation to ensure the continuation of the German Kulturnation.

Such a solution . . . could contribute to the development of a new understanding of ‘nation,’ which would exclude reunification, but, on the other hand, could assist Germans in two states to find a new, relaxed self-understanding. This would also preclude a renewed political power build-up in the center of Europe. Our neighbors in East and West needn’t fear such a development any more.

Apart from his preference for this universalist, postfascist, and pacifist vision for a German culture, Grass was concerned that the Kulturabkommen could negatively affect the arts and cultural economies: It would promote only what was officially acceptable art in both German states, thus implicitly censoring artistic expression. Grass exclaimed that “everywhere where art, where literature, where painting is created, it is necessarily subversive, and it will thus be, perhaps even from both sides, be held back.” The Kulturabkommen, notwithstanding its original intentions of deregulating German-German cultural exchange, could possibly become a tool for state censorship of the arts.

Despite Grass’s warnings, the Federal Republic pursued the Kulturabkommen to continue the normalization of German-German relations. Rather than heeding Grass’s concerns about the treaty’s meaning for the German national idea and cultural diversity, politicians in the Federal Republic valued its practical merits: They could hold the GDR leadership accountable to a signed treaty, but not to the lofty idea of a unified Kulturnation.
German-German State-Mediated Cultural Exchange and the *Kulturabkommen*

To a certain extent, Grass was right. The events that came out of the *Kulturabkommen* indeed centered on promoting cultural products that affirmed official policy and national narratives. Subversive modern art, such as the 1983 postmodern artwork “Consumer’s Rest,” a re-appropriated and manipulated shopping cart with which West Berlin designer Frank Schreiner playfully critiqued consumer society, did not rank high on the West German priority list for German–German cultural exchange. Too much was at stake as well in the realm of economic culture and industrial design to employ humor, which is evident in the events surrounding the planning and execution of two industrial design exhibitions before and after the signing of the *Kulturabkommen*: the FRG exhibition *Design—Thinking Ahead for Humanity* in East Berlin (1984) and the *Design in the GDR* show in Stuttgart (1988). These exhibitions showcase the political strategies behind intra-German cultural exchanges, while illustrating the significance of the *Kulturabkommen* as a cornerstone for a more self-determined *Deutschlandpolitik*.

The idea for the West German exhibition originated in 1983 against the backdrop of deteriorating East-West relations during the Soviet-American Geneva talks about the American Pershing missiles in the Federal Republic. In this tense atmosphere, Bonn commissioned the RfF to assemble a West German industrial exhibition. The Federal Ministry for Intra-German Relations (BMB) and the BMWi jointly coordinated the planning effort so that the FRG government could pitch the project as part of the interim state-mediated cultural exchange. Emphasizing that it would contribute to peace in Europe, the western side made clear that holding the design exhibition within the same calendar year was of “political significance.” Using every available channel, the Federal Republic impressed the event’s importance for German–German relations on the SED leadership. Minister for Economic Affairs Otto Graf Lambsdorff even brought the exhibition pitch on a trip to the Leipzig trade fair in the spring of 1984. Nine months after Hans Otto Bräutigam, the head of the Permanent Representative Mission in East Berlin, had first proposed the design exhibition to the GDR deputy foreign minister Kurt Nier, the project came to fruition. The exhibition ran for two weeks in December 1984 as the fourth project the Federal Republic sent as part of the state-mediated cultural exchange since 1975. None of Bonn’s initiative had been coordinated with transatlantic partners, signaling to the international community the German determination to
“insulate inter-German relations from the vicissitudes of relations between the superpowers.”

Initially, the GDR hesitated to support the West German project. Yet after a few weeks of deliberations, it swallowed the bait that the RfF had put in the exhibition proposal: a symposium that would convey “specialized technical and professional details and suggestions.” With the exhibition would come an opportunity to inspect West German industrial products and to learn about their aesthetic, structural, and technological qualities, without the risks and costs associated with industrial espionage. It was a welcome chance for East German

**Figure 4.2.** West Berlin artist Frank Schreiner designed “Consumer’s Rest” as a playful critique of consumerism in 1983. © DACS 2019.
research and development to catch up to world standards, a preoccupation for the GDR.

With the exception of the venue, the preparations for *Design—Thinking Ahead for Humanity* went smoothly, and the exhibition opened on 3 December 1984, in the International Trade Center in the heart of East Berlin. High-ranking East and West German politicians, representatives of GDR cultural organizations, and the industrial designers from the RfF and the AiF attended the opening event. Even Wolfgang Schäuble, the chancellery chief of staff in the first Helmut Kohl government, visited during his first official trip to the GDR. During the opening speech, Martin Kelm highlighted the political significance of German-German rapprochement at this moment: “We regard the fact that this exhibition takes place as a positive sign, particularly at a time when the international situation gives reason for serious concerns. . . . Even the best intentions and the best design achievements would make no sense for humanity if a nuclear inferno cannot be prevented.”

Hans Otto Bräutigam of the Permanent Mission also commented on the international situation when he greeted the guests:

> The Federal Government is determined to continue the path paved by the Basic Treaty and the Helsinki Accords. We want to extend cooperation and take advantage of every chance to improve relations. We do this conscious of our shared responsibility for peace and stability in Europe and in the interest of the people on both sides. Cultural activities such as this exhibition are the building blocks for good neighborly relations between the two German states.

Such expressions of “mini-détente” in German-German relations solidified the idea of their special role in maintaining East-West dialogue. Sharing concerns about becoming hostages of the superpower arms race with other non-nuclear nations in Europe offered a new vision for pan-German foreign policy: a Germany unified for the universal values of peace and accord.

West Germany’s emphasis on interpersonal relations in the German-German rapprochement was expressed by the exhibition’s content. From its conception, it was intended to show design’s contribution to everyday life by means of selected, progressive solutions. Humans and the social fabric, not the products themselves, stood at the center and provided the premise for “deepening mutual knowledge about cultural and social existence” in the two German states.

High-profile guests, diplomatic speeches, and the awareness that this German-German display of harmony stood in stark contrast to the tense Second Cold
War benefited both sides in the diplomatic arena. The exhibition consciously continued the Federal Republic’s efforts with *Neue Ostpolitik*, to change the Cold War status quo and the push for direct interaction between the German populations.

Materially, the West German show was impressive. Nearly two hundred products, systems, and projects from more than a hundred businesses conveyed the evolution of industrial design in the Federal Republic. A historical section contextualized West German design in the Werkbund and the Bauhaus traditions of modern, functionalist aesthetics. Visitors quickly realized that the exhibition was not a sales show when they saw the lavish products displayed for home interiors. The luxury furniture company Interlübke sent its high-priced Duo-Bed, while the furniture cooperative Wohnkultur displayed the top-selling, yet expensive, WK 470 furniture system, and Vitsoe showed an upholstery suite. None of the East German visitors could afford such pricey furniture nor could most West Germans. Rather, the exhibition clearly showcased the perks of the Western lifestyle with the amenities of high-end designer interiors and high-technology standards for appliances and tools. In addition to displays
of affluence, the descriptions accompanying the interior designs provoked East German political cadres with a critique of the GDR surveillance society. One read, for example, “In a mass society and an increasingly depersonalized environment, the personal apartment remains one of the few areas where one can realize individual ideas.” The home, the text suggested to GDR audiences, offered a space for personal freedom and self-expression, an escape from the state’s control over its citizens. Such provocations affected cultural exchanges during the show’s two-week run.

The initial impression of a close-knit inter-German relationship created by the exhibition documents’ emphasis on “peace in Europe” and “German-German understanding” is quickly nuanced by materials from the East German archives. Unbeknownst to the guests from the Federal Republic, the SED closely monitored and manipulated the exhibition. Event advertisement posters provided by the RfF were only put up in obscure places, if at all. The GDR leadership hoped to keep the number of visitors to a minimum, yet thanks to word of mouth, their numbers rose by the day. In a press release, the Permanent Mission celebrated the fact that 22,000 people had seen the show during its first week. The crowd’s youth was noticed; it revealed that the SED populated the West German product show with chosen party-loyal groups, trusted young professionals, and design students.

Only about two hundred visitors were “average” GDR citizens on the first day of Design—Thinking Ahead for Humanity. In addition to the at best insufficient exhibition promotion, the AiF purposely slowed down the admission into the venue. Each day during opening hours, a queue of 150–200 curious East Germans stood in front of the International Trade Center. Officials from the FRG’s Permanent Mission stopped by several times and asked the AiF staff to open more registers to decrease the waiting time. The eastern side withstood the pressure, claimed to have been bullied, and complained that Bonn connected political profitability to attendance. The West Germans decided to ignore this provocation. Overall, 66,000 people visited the exhibition in eighteen days, and the RfF sold every one of the 40,000 available catalogs.

Meanwhile, the AiF feared that the displays of Western affluence might potentially lead to open critique of socialism and its economic shortcomings. Two days before the industrial exhibition opened, it outright confiscated a number of West German design books that the RfF provided in the exhibition. However, after the books were removed, visitors simply turned to the information and technical descriptions provided in the exhibition texts. Moreover, the East German exhibition personnel prevented contact between East German visitors
and the RfF staff on hand to answer visitors’ questions. As a countermeasure, the AiF outfitted its own staff with a twenty-page disinformation script to enable them to discredit western achievements in conversation with exhibition visitors. Emphasizing the potential negative effects of market capitalism and profitmaking on the social fabric of a country, the text characterized industrial design and its institutions in the Federal Republic as “ineffective.”

However, the feared consumer protest failed to materialize. The internal AiF event report described visitors’ reactions as “confident and competent-critical with specialized design interest.” It is possible that the staff did not record visitors’ disgruntlement accurately so as to give the impression that they had the situation under control. Certainly, earlier design shows had attracted critical, if knowledgeable, audiences in the GDR that usually did not hold back with critique. With a public relations fiasco successfully averted, the SED leadership confidently completed the negotiations over the German-German Kulturabkommen in 1986 without further complications. Once the West German event had ended, the GDR design institution looked forward to sending an exhibition to the West in accordance with the principle of reciprocity.

Yet it would take more than three years for the GDR industrial design show to finally be sent to West Germany in May 1988. The fact that the AiF, the Foreign Ministry, the DIA, the collectivized industry, and design schools all collaborated on the Design in the GDR exhibition illustrates the complex interweaving of industry, industrial design, trade, and cultural foreign policy. However, the extent of the effort did not match the prestige of the resulting industrial exhibition. One of the regional design institutions in the West, the Design Center in Stuttgart, hosted the exhibition in its representative nineteenth-century building, far from Bonn. To ensure the political and economic success of the event, the SED leadership demanded elaborate advertising strategies. But the West German government quickly thwarted these efforts. When the time came to print the catalog, the GDR Permanent Mission in Bonn asked for a short greeting from the chief of staff of the Federal Chancellery to parallel high-ranking GDR politicians’ participation in the 1984 exhibition. To their great astonishment, Bonn denied the request, claiming that: “These kinds of forewords were common during the period of rare, individual state-mediated cultural projects in prior years. In the light of the extensive project list agreed upon after the signing of the Kulturabkommen, this kind of high-level preface should not generally be planned on; they should be reserved for especially high-ranking projects.”

Diplomatic gestures such as an official greeting would only further legitimize the GDR, which Bonn wanted to prevent. With the signing of the cultural
agreement in 1986, the Federal Republic had reached its goal of securing German-German exchanges on a nongovernmental level, and this exhibition presented the perfect opportunity to put this achievement into practice. If the East had not noticed the political effects of the Kulturabkommen at the time, they surely realized them in 1988.

A loss of diplomatic significance in conjunction with the provincial exhibition location demoted the GDR design show from a national event of political importance to a regional event of purely economic interest. Only one West German regional politician attended the opening event, the RfF did not even pay an official visit. The FRG design journal Form covered the exhibition only in an eight-line news item that stated matter-of-factly that 170 products from the GDR were on display in Stuttgart’s design center between 26 May and 31 July 1988, providing broader historical as well as recent insights into GDR design development.142

Meanwhile, the AiF tried to make the best of the situation. The East German design journal Form und Zweck dedicated an entire page to the exhibition. Exaggerating the importance of the Stuttgart Design Center, it described the challenges of putting together the exposition in such a “lavish” environment. “We could not simply present products with ‘Design in der DDR’ because it was important to depict the way of living and culture, to convey knowledge about the country, its economic potential, and its people,” the author explained.143 In this regard, the GDR project emulated the West German show of 1984—the event aimed at creating a dialogue and deepening mutual understanding, while not shying away from “critical comparison.”144 But the result was quite different. Over the exhibit’s long run, it had just 18,000 visitors. According to the Form und Zweck article, West German visitors perceived GDR design as high quality in its usefulness and as “aesthetically respectable without attempting to circumvent social responsibility with spectacular pieces.”145 Although not exactly a rave review, the design council staff seemed satisfied with having proven the GDR’s prowess as an export nation.

Martin Kelm and Michael Blank, since 1987 the director of the newly established GDR Design Center in East Berlin, visited the RfF that summer. At this occasion, Blank talked about industrial design development in German socialism, mentioning the showcase specifically, with the editor of the RfF journal Design Report. In this conversation, he reached far back to Horst Michel’s humble beginnings in Weimar during the occupation years to claim a long tradition and continuity in functionalist East German design aesthetics. To the learned observer, the claim just did not match the reality of the hard-fought
battles against functionally unnecessary embellishments that socialist realism had bred throughout the 1950s. This was clearly an exercise in emphasizing common ground with the West German host for economic reasons. Blank admitted that some prototypes had been placed in the exhibition to provide stimulation for trade but simultaneously dismissed the notion that the showcase had been conceptualized as a trade fair with a marketing strategy. “We deliberately changed the title [from Design from the GDR to Design in the GDR] to show how it works here, what we do and how,” he assured the Design Report editor. When the conversation turned to future exchange projects with the mention of cooperation opportunities in Berlin, Blank quickly reined in the interviewer by invoking Berlin’s contested status and reminded him that—from East Germany’s perspective—the RfF represented West Germany, but not West Berlin. Cold War politics clearly remained a limiting element in exchanges between the RfF and the AiF until the last days of German division.

Later in 1988, the West German liaison to the GDR Permanent Mission in Bonn summarized the lessons learned from the German-German cultural exchange. Her memo stated that there had been many possibilities for cultural contacts and exchanges with persons and institutions in the GDR, especially since there was no language barrier and plenty of shared traditions. However, “Cooperation in the classical sense was very rare, because the GDR avoids ‘the all-German’ (Gesamtdeutsches).” It was difficult for the GDR to uphold its policy of delineation after the agreed-upon cooperation in the Basic Treaty and the Kulturabkommen. From the western perspective relations with the East improved over time, whereas the GDR preferred cultural cooperation with countries of the Eastern Bloc precisely for reasons of demarcation. Nevertheless, the piecemeal effort to improve German-German relations via cultural cooperation paid off for both sides.

While Bonn aborted the Hallstein Doctrine as the international climate shifted from confrontation to détente, it capitalized on this moment to free itself from superpower politics by creating a sustainable German-German dialogue. Of course, the four-power agreements still decided the fate of Germany on a diplomatic level, but the German-German policy of rapprochement clearly improved and facilitated contacts between the East and West on an individual and organizational level. By pushing for nongovernmental relations between East and West Germans, especially in the realm of everyday culture, Bonn achieved its long-term goal of loosening the SED’s grip on every aspect of East German social and cultural life. The shared cultural heritage, especially in the case of industrial design, brought each Germany closer to the quotidian reality on the
other side of the border. What is more, the FRG thus gave the GDR the chance to “function as an actor on the world stage,” despite its lack of autonomy from the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{148} The Bonn–East Berlin negotiations were part and parcel of the GDR’s transition from pariah to internationally recognized state. In the process, the GDR successfully broke the West German \textit{Alleinvertretungsanspruch}. Its claim to membership among modern nations, expressed in and communicated through its economic culture, received political legitimization at last.