Christopher Young & Kay Schiller

Werner Ruhnau and the "Avenue of the Games" (*Spielstraße*) at the 1972 Munich Olympic Games

The 1972 Munich Summer Olympics were largely the brainchild of the Dortmund industrialist and head of German sport, Willi Daume (1913–1996). Apart from staging the quadrennial spectacle of sports and culture for the International Olympic Committee (IOC) on German soil for the first time since the "Nazi Games" of 1936, Daume wanted to use the opportunity to represent a "modern Germany" to the world. A brilliant visionary, he first saw his chance with the IOC in 1965, then convinced Munich's mayor Hans-Jochen Vogel (born in 1926) to put the city forward, secured government funding and saw the Games through from conception to completion. Some fifty years later, Daume is almost completely forgotten, whereas the Games are mainly remembered for the Palestinian terrorist attack and the death of eleven Israeli sportsmen.

Even today, however, a visitor to the Munich Olympic site cannot fail to notice the spectacular architecture and design of the 1972 Games. The centrepiece of Munich's architecture was the sweeping 75,000 square-metre Olympic roof developed by Stuttgart architects Günter Behnisch and Partners. The Munich Olympic colour scheme, emblem, posters, and pictograms in turn were the work of the bureau of Otl Aicher, a world-renown designer from Ulm. At the time both Behnisch (1922–2010) and Aicher (1922–1991) were tasked with conveying a positive image of West Germany to audiences around the world who were still sceptical about the country due to the problematic legacy of the Nazi past. They certainly succeeded. While the roof's openness and transparency came to symbolize the positive attributes of the Bonn Republic, Aicher's designs suggested that West Germany society was modern and well-organized, informal, and easy-going.

A decade younger than Daume, Behnisch and Aicher belonged to the political generation of the "1945ers" or "sceptical" generation who from the 1960s left their mark on the Bonn Republic's politics and society. Having experienced the disaster of Nazi Germany as boys and young men, the "1945ers" rejected ideologies hailing from both the political left and right. Rather, these men were self-confident "doers" (*Macher*) who embarked upon shaping West Germany's young democracy and "economic miracle" in pragmatic and unideological ways. They believed in engineering and technology and trusted in the feasibility (*Machbarkeit*) of the future through planning. What better opportunity to demonstrate their skills than in putting on a mega-spectacle like the Olympic Games? This would be their most visible legacy.

But the world was already rapidly changing in the late 1960s when they got to work on this project.

The preparations for Munich coincided with a return of ideology in a major way and a period of great political and social unrest around the globe which nobody had foreseen. One ominous sign was the violence which marred the previous Olympic Games in Mexico City. Just ten days before the 1968 opening ceremony, a summer of violent clashes between student protesters and the military culminated in the Tlatelolco Massacre which caused an

estimated 260 deaths and 1,200 injuries within a stone's throw of the Olympic site. The protesters had chanted: "We don't want Olympic Games! We want a revolution!" And once underway, the 1968 Summer Olympics were dominated by the Black Power protests of American medallists Tommie Smith and John Carlos.

But protests were not limited to countries in the developing world. Across vast tracts of the West, the "1968ers", a new political generation, came to the fore and made their voices heard. Rejecting middle-class values, young people espoused a range of alternatives which invariably involved a rejection of traditional parental worldviews, the return of ideology in the shape of New Left thought and demands for increased political participation. Apart from brutal wars like that fought by the US in Vietnam, which served as a welcome trigger for wave after wave of protests and demonstrations, the civil unrest of "1968" was largely due to a generation gap. In West Germany, this pitted a large, prosperous, well-educated, and culturally autonomous younger generation against their parents, whose formative experiences during the Depression, the cataclysm of World War II and the toils of post-war reconstruction they neither shared nor understood. In essence, "1968" was a cultural revolution (Eric Hobsbawm) which followed on from the social revolution which the post-war "golden age" of economic development had brought about.

From the perspective of the organisers of the Munich Olympics, "1968" transformed their spectacle into contested territory. How exactly were they to stage an event, defined famously since the days of Pierre de Coubertin (1863–1937) as a celebration for the "youth of the world", when its chief participants had become distinctly disaffected? And how, in an international context, could "modern Germany" be adequately represented when the country was changing and challenging itself at a rapid rate? These were just some of the questions that faced Daume and the other organisers. Even if many of the key decisions about the particular form the Munich Games would take had been reached before 1968, and even if some of the most critical opposition to the Olympics among critical German youth had all but blown out by the late summer of 1972, the ways in which the organisers engaged with the intellectual and social climate created by "1968" is a crucial element in the narrative of the Games.

Formatted: English (United Kingdom)

This context threw up a further challenge: the relationship between sport and art. For de Coubertin's Games were not merely meant as a celebration for the youth of the world, they were conceived, uniquely in world sporting competition, as a fundamental amalgam of body and movement cultures on the one hand and their aesthetic representation on the other. The Games, he wrote in 1911 after the Paris (1900), St Louis (1904), and London (1908) iterations fell short of his expectations, should create a "unity of the athlete with the spectator the surroundings, the decoration, and the landscape". From 1912 to 1948, at his behest, there had been a series of Olympic Art Competitions, covering architecture, literature, music, painting, and sculpture. The Munich organisers were well aware of this artistic strand in Olympic ideology. In bidding for the Games, they had played to the old guard tastes of traditionalist IOC members, not least its President Avery Brundage (1887–1975), emphasising the city's importance as a centre for high culture. The Games would of course go on to deliver a high volume of classical culture, as well as modernism and the avantgarde, in the city's traditional venues. But as Daume recognised, it was not simply a case of taking the country's "intellectual heritage" and "hanging it from hooks on the tent

Formatted: English (United Kingdom)

roof". Bringing art to the heart of the Olympic site itself would need a more radical and sophisticated approach.

Working out how to achieve this caused the biggest row in the Organising Committee (OC), certainly to that point and possibly over the entire course of its existence. A paper presented by Herbert Hohenemser (1915–1992), assessor of culture at Munich City Hall and Chair of the OC's Arts Committee, in April 1969 was the cause of stormy debate. Hohenemser was both a close colleague of Vogel's and confidant of Aicher's *Das Große Spiel*, as the prototype was entitled, intended to bring youth, sport, and art together in an encounter that was of its time and, in the nature of the times, revolutionary. It envisaged an interactive, largely spontaneous range of performance arts unfolding within the Olympic precincts that would "bring about the desired integration of sport and the arts" and "make conscious use of the now almost ubiquitous movement of youth". But creating "a vent for the youth movement and its unrest" and unable to guarantee that "everything would go off without incident", the proposal was seen as a high risk strategy that the Committee could not endorse without serious reservations.

This is where Werner Ruhnau (1922–2015) came in. By the end of the year, the design and execution of the project, under the new name *Spielstraße* ("Avenue of the Games"), had been placed in his capable hands. Like Behnisch and Aicher, Ruhnau was a "1945er". A graduate of the Technical Universities of Gdansk, Braunschweig and Karlsruhe, he was an expert on modernist theatre design and mobile theatres with a penchant for experimentation. In his early career, returning to the medieval concept of the construction hut (*Bauhütte*), he had lived for months on the building sites of projects on which he was working. In the 1950s, he had gained early success with teams that had won commissions for the Stadttheater in Münster (1952–1956) and the Musiktheater im Revier in Gelsenkirchen (1959). And in the 1960s, he had collaborated with Frei Otto – who provided the architectural inspiration for Munich's iconic tent roof – on the German pavilion at Expo '67 in Montreal. And he had held a professorship at Montreal's School of Architecture for several years. He was the ideal person for the job. But it was a job that would be far from easy.

The concerns raised before Ruhnau was commissioned hardly disappeared on his appointment. Anxieties about and antipathies towards the project continued to simmer, and over the subsequent years of development several factors constrained his efforts. Security and image were top of the list. Ruhnau was told straightaway that any notion of improvised street theatre was completely off the agenda. Artists had to be selected in advance, their credentials scrutinized and signed off by the OC's General Secretariat before contracts were completed. All plans could be subject to last-minute cancellation, should the mood or circumstances change. Conservatives, particularly among the influential fraternity of senior sports functionaries, railed against the concept at every opportunity, in committee rooms and in the press. And – surprisingly given their ideological alignment, but unsurprisingly given their desire to protect the integrity of their own project – the stadium and parkland designers were reluctant to allow their colleague free rein. Behnisch viewed the whole of the Oberwiesenfeld as a *work of art* three hundred hectares in size: art set within it could only be an irritant. Even Daume, while open to some critique of high-performance sport, was not unconditionally so: no individual athlete was to be attacked and

the feathers of the ever sensitive International Olympic Committee were to be left unruffled.

Bit by bit, the *Spielstraße* had its radical edge worn down by lengthy and wearisome negotiations on multiple fronts. Some critics accused it of ending up a "museum piece" (*museal*). But even in a form less radical than Hohenemser and Ruhnau originally intended, it was a stunning new venture in the history of Olympic festivals – and a massive success. The generous Olympic parkland was inviting to those who could not come by tickets for the sports events, and the *Spielstraße* was at the heart of it. Located along the stretches of the northern and southern banks of the artificial lake adjacent to the Olympic swimming hall, it consisted of thirty stages spread along half a mile of pathways, the Theatron its centrepiece. In the ten days that it ran, it attracted some 1.2 million visitors, twice the total that attended all of the other cultural events put together.

In its ultimate version, the *Spielstraße* sought to remove the division between athletes and visitors in the park, wooing spectators to abandon their passive spectatorship, immerse themselves in play, and in so doing, eliminate or reconfigure the roles consumers normally assumed when they entered a stadium. It was a vision in keeping with the notion of play developed by the Dutch historian and cultural philosopher Johan Huizinga in his seminal *Homo ludens* (1938) – a text admired and often cited by Daume – and inspired by Ruhnau's own deep-seated determination to foster "citizens capable of acting with reason" (*der Mitbürger, der mündig wird*).

The venture drew on over two hundred artists and a further two hundred technicians and support staff from around the world to produce a panoply of different art forms. These ranged from photography, film, video projections, and live-transmission from radio stations to free jazz, folk music, avantgarde painting and sculpture, physical games on which the public could play, inflatable air cushions, and installations for visitors to test their senses. If the documentary footage is anything to go by, the vast majority of visitors enjoyed it very much. They were also provoked, despite the Organising Committee's caution, to reflect on the nature of Olympic sport through a series of performances based loosely on particular Olympic Games: for example, 408 BC, Athens 1896, Stockholm 1912, Los Angeles 1932, Mexico City 1968 and the future Games of 2000. Enacted by a group of international street-theatre groups – from New York, Buenos Aires, Paris, Stockholm, Rome, Tokyo and Berlin – each explored critical issues around sport, politics, culture and society. Few punches were pulled. The most striking dramatisation was Shuji Terayama's take on Mexico 1968 and the Tlatelolco Massacre in particular. His *Tenjo Sajiki* troupe enacted scenes of utmost brutality: black-hooded actors blindfolded, manhandled and whipped fellow actors onto a platform surrounded by the spectators; there they were stripped to the waist, hung out over the rails and allowed to drop one by one into the crowd below. Spectators regularly left in shock.

Formatted: Font: Italic, Complex Script Font: Italic

But the real horror was still to come. The Japanese group's play proved an eerie premonition of the violence that would interrupt the Games and leave an indelible mark on their memory. On 5 September 1972, members of the Palestinian terrorist group Black September held eleven members of the Israeli team hostage in their apartment in the Olympic Village, a day-long siege that was witnessed throughout the day by television

viewers around the world and ended in tragedy at Fürstenfeldbruck airport. There was and remains no comparable moment in the history of sport.

In a state of profound shock, the organisers, with the support of the IOC, decided to let the Games continue. After a brief pause, all sporting and cultural events went ahead as planned, with one notable exception: the *Spielstraße*. At an extraordinary meeting of the Organising Committee, the Bavarian Minister of Finance Ludwig Huber demanded its closure with immediate effect. The proposal met with little opposition and the *Spielstraße* ended on 6 September. The same meeting voted unanimously to leave festive decoration around the city in place. But as conservative voices seized the opportunity to sanction a form of culture that had never been to their taste, the progressive voices that had sustained and articulated it had the final word. The actors of the Tenjo Sajiki group took to the stage at the Theatron and burned their props before a full house.

In 1973, Willi Daume hailed the *Spielstraße* as one of the highlights of the Games. Nearly fifty years on, those who remember it would hardly disagree. And those who are encountering it for the first time through this exhibition, will – we hope – recognise it as a special element of a special time and event.