The Ballin House

A precious detail of Hamburg’s history
Hapag-Lloyd arose on 1 September 1970 from the merger of two shipping companies, the Hamburg-Amerikanische Packetfahrt-Aktiengesellschaft (Hamburg-American Line, or Hapag) and Norddeutscher Lloyd (North German Lloyd, or NDL). But the roots of the company – which remains one of the largest liner shipping companies in the world – go back much further.

Hapag was founded by local merchants in Hamburg in 1847. At first, it primarily transported European emigrants to the United States, a booming business at the time. At the end of the 1880s, Hapag had its first express steamers built, placing it at the forefront of the North Atlantic trade – where Hapag-Lloyd still numbers among the leaders, though transporting containers rather than people. Shortly before the turn of the century, Hapag rose to the top as the shipping company with the world’s largest tonnage under Albert Ballin (1857-1918), its subsequent Director-General.
REVIVED TWICE

However, when the First World War ended, what remained of the fleet was lost under the Treaty of Versailles. In the Weimar Republic, Hapag, like NDL, managed to push its way back up to the top of international shipping. In 1929, just ten years after the Hamburg shipping company had forfeited its ships, it once again employed a staff of 18,000 on land and at sea. But the short post-war respite known as the “Golden 20s” were quickly over, only to be followed by a recession and yet another war.

Their fleets were lost once more to the victorious powers or had already sunk to the bottom of the oceans in the war, which lasted until 1945. Beginning in 1950, when Hapag and NDL got back into the liner shipping business, they were already doing so with jointly operated services for the most part. Towards the end of the 1960s, when the rapid growth in container traffic made it necessary to invest heavily in containers and new vessels, the two shipping companies combined their strengths by merging in 1970. The headquarters of the new company, Hapag-Lloyd AG, was the building on the Inner Alster Lake.
ASCENT THROUGH ACQUISITIONS

After acquiring the British-Canadian shipping company CP Ships in 2005, Hapag-Lloyd joined the ranks of the top five liner shipping companies in the world. Then, in 2014, the container business of the Chilean shipping company CSAV was integrated into Hapag-Lloyd. In return, CSAV was given newly issued shares that made it one of the three largest anchor shareholders in the company, along with the City of Hamburg and the private businessman Klaus-Michael Kühne. Hapag-Lloyd now has some 9,000 employees in almost 120 countries worldwide and has been publically listed again since late 2015.

Although there have been some profound turning points in the company’s history, one thing has remained unchanged since the early days of Hapag and NDL. The company is clearly structured, commercially successful, geared towards the future and globally oriented – just like it has been for some 170 years. Indeed, the old Hanseatic motto that welcomes employees and guests upon entering the Ballin House still applies: “The world is my oyster.”
The success story of Germany’s largest liner shipping company began in 1847 with the founding of the Hamburg-Amerikanische Packetfahrt-Actien-Gesellschaft – abbreviated as “HAPAG” back then but usually as “Hapag” today. At first, the company primarily transported emigrants to the United States. Its first headquarters, at 7 Deichstrasse, were replaced in 1890 by a magnificent Renaissance building at 19-20 Dovenfleet. At this stage, the company’s headquarters started rapidly expanding. In 1897, when Hapag celebrated its 50th anniversary, 137 employees worked there. As the building on Dovenfleet grew too cramped, the company’s leadership decided in 1899 to purchase a row of properties directly adjacent to the Inner Alster Lake. Known then as Alsterdamm (and today as Ballindamm), the area had been built up in 1842 from the rubble left over by the Great Fire of Hamburg.

Martin Haller, who had previously designed the tower-crowned building on Dovenfleet, was commissioned to construct the new administrative building. He was Hamburg’s most famous architect at the time, and some of his typical villas can still be seen around the Alster Lake today. His best-known work is the Hamburg Town Hall.

Haller also constructed Hapag’s offices in the Renaissance style popular at the time. In 1903, the three-storey building on Alsterdamm was ready for occupancy. It was topped by a seven-meter-high statue of Neptune with a trident and steeds galloping over the waves, the work of a 33-year-old, as-yet-unknown artist from Holstein named Ernst Barlach. The figures can unfortunately no longer be seen, as they were melted down during the First World War.
A MAP OF THE WORLD FROM 1903 STILL ON DISPLAY

Hapag’s new headquarters building was designed to be extremely spacious inside, and it simultaneously served as a check-in space for the passenger services. First-class passengers booked their passages in the domed hall that now houses the company canteen. Hanging over the entrance is a large map of the world showing the shipping lines Hapag operated at the time.

Contemporary newspapers in Hamburg made extensive comments about the company’s relocation from the Kontorhaus office district to the Inner Alster Lake. Apparently, readers were particularly interested in knowing where “Director Ballin’s” office would now be. The HAMBURGISCHER CORRESPONDENT revealed the details: “First floor, on the right, with an antechamber, of course!”

The new office building was a huge, magnificent structure that perfectly fit with the prevailing tastes of the time. It was ornately decorated, particularly on the main façade facing the Alster Lake. Four powerful, elaborate sandstone caryatids – the works of the sculptors Börner and Cauer – flanked the entrance.

The statues were meant to symbolise the four continents with which the shipping company had ties, but there was only limited enthusiasm for them in Hamburg. For example, Alfred Lichtwark, the influential director of the city’s art museum, is said to have come up with the imaginary conversation between a Hamburg native and a visitor about the colossal figures, which quickly spread through the stock exchange and beyond:

“Tell me, what are these four figures supposed to represent?”
“Five senses.”
“Five? But there are only four!”
“Exactly. Taste is missing…”

THE HAPAG HEADQUARTERS NEEDS TO EXPAND

The widespread, sharp criticism did not go unheeded. When the headquarters once again became too small, the contract for the expansion went this time to Fritz Höger, a modern architect influenced by expressionism. Together with Fritz Schumacher, this Holstein native (1877-1949) was regarded as the “father” of a new type of Hamburg architecture. Instead of plaster, which was fashionable at the time, they used a traditional material from the region: red brick. In fact, Höger is regarded as one of the most important exponents of Brick Expressionism. Perhaps his best-known clinker brick building is the Chilehaus in Hamburg, which was built in the 1920s and whose shape is reminiscent of a large ship’s prow.

For the Hapag building, however, Höger had to work without his favourite material, as the pre-existing building made it necessary to use light-coloured sandstone. A decision had been made to organically incorporate the older structure, double its size and combine the two parts into a single entity.

Höger wanted to do justice to Hamburg’s great Hanseatic tradition – but just not with excessive pomp, voguish adornments and too much harking back to bygone eras. On the side facing the Alster, Höger added another storey onto the existing building and then united both parts of the building by covering its entire length with a single, unified façade and roof. Although the old building could no longer be seen from outside, its interior spaces were preserved.
A TECHNICAL MASTERPIECE

What sounds so easy was actually a technical and artistic masterpiece – but one that still required compromises. Today, anyone unfamiliar with the building’s interior layout will have trouble finding their way around and may be puzzled by the seemingly senseless corridors, staircases, corners or odd passageways.

However, all of this was hidden behind the new façade. And what arose between Alsterdamm and Ferdinandstrasse was a uniform building complex. Plain and simple, it stood there in light-coloured Obernkirchen sandstone, unadorned yet elegant, and distinguished by its materials and proportions alone. It was a completely different style, a new accent on Hamburg’s gem, the Inner Alster Lake.

Construction began in 1913, and the building was occupied in 1921. But by then the world was a different place, and the zeitgeist had radically changed. The First World War (1914-1918) had interrupted the construction for years, but it was also a turning point in terms of architectural history. With its simple yet noble functionality, the Höger building perfectly suited a world that had become more sober.

The fact that Hapag completed its new building on Alsterdamm so quickly after the end of the war, despite losing its entire fleet, was also a demonstration of a will to survive. In fact, it was the first new building of major importance to be finished in post-war Hamburg.

Entrance hall Ferdinandstrasse, ground floor Ballin House

1945

BUILDING SURVIVES WAR WITH ONLY MINOR DAMAGE
SPARED FROM BOMBS DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

As if by a miracle, the Hapag building was largely spared from the carpet bombing of the United Kingdom’s Royal Air Force, while other sections of the city were utterly flattened. In contrast, bombs completely destroyed the NDL headquarters building on Papenstrasse in Bremen, which was not rebuilt after the war. In Hamburg, on the other hand, only the fourth floor of the Hapag building fell victim to fire, and the façade was damaged. During reconstruction, a fifth storey was added. The entrance hall, which had suffered little damage, temporarily housed various departments during the immediate post-war period until it could return to its previous function as a reception and representation area. A few months after the beginning of the war, the National Socialists moved the War Navy Garrison’s Admiral’s Court in Hamburg into the Ballin House. As a result, until the devastating air attacks on Hamburg in the summer of 1943, several trials were held on Alsterdamm against members of the navy and seafarers forced into service. Over these three years, the judges handed down more than 40 death sentences. Today, a stone tablet in front of the Ballin House reminds viewers of this injustice.

In 1947, Alsterdamm was renamed. Albert Ballin, considered a non-person during the Nazi period as a Jew, gave Alsterdamm its new name: Ballindamm. In 1997, Hapag-Lloyd also honoured its great Director-General posthumously to mark the company’s 150th anniversary. Since then, the building has been called the “Ballin House.”

Today, the offices in the storied Ballin House, some of which have very high ceilings, accommodate roughly 850 employees. Among them are the Executive Board, staff departments (including Legal, Corporate Communications, Controlling, Bookkeeping, Corporate Development and Ship Management) and various head office units.
The phrase “The world is my oyster”, which stands in golden letters above the wide marble stairs in the Ballin Hall, is the motto that Albert Ballin, as Director-General of Hapag, adopted for his company at around the turn of the previous century. The German version, which replaces “oyster” with “domain”, was a well-known slogan of Hanseatic merchants. At this point, Ballin could also look back on his own unparalleled career with pride: Born in Hamburg in 1857, he was the 13th child of a nearly destitute Jewish immigrant from Denmark running a small emigration agency. Although one would imagine this to be a bad starting point for a promising career, Ballin rose to become head of the biggest shipping company in the world – in fact, he was the one to make Hapag No. 1 worldwide. According to a later biography, he had risen to become the “uncrowned king of his native city of Hamburg”. Ballin was a “friend” and advisor of Emperor William II, he was respected by other shipping magnates across the world, and he served several times as a mediator during ruinous rate wars.

In 1886, after delivering the proud shipping company and another Hamburg-based rival from a painful price war for passage tickets to the New World, the young Albert Ballin started working for Hapag as a passage agent. By 1899, he was already the Director-General of Hapag. Ballin revolutionised the passenger shipping industry with new, comfortable amenities, and he is also regarded as the inventor of the modern cruising industry.

In the Ballin Hall: lettering “The world is my oyster”
Albert Ballin – friend of the Emperor and world-class shipping magnate

1857
BIRTH IN HAMBURG

1874
DEATH OF HIS FATHER; TAKEOVER OF HIS TICKETING AGENCY

1886
STARTS AT HAPAG AS A PASSAGE AGENT
THE WAR ROBS HIM OF HIS LIFE’S WORK

Under the leadership of this visionary businessman, Hapag rode on a wave of success. Its ship tonnage exceeded the commercial fleets of entire countries. At that time, the only serious competitor for the position of the most important shipping company in the world was Bremen-based North German Lloyd (NDL). In 1970, a merger would turn the two former rivals into a single shipping company: Hapag-Lloyd AG. But there would still be several major challenges to overcome before then.

One was the First World War. As Hapag chief, Albert Ballin judged it to be “the most foolish and bloody of all wars” from the very beginning. For years before the outbreak of the war, Ballin had pressed hard for a settlement between Germany and Britain, discreetly – and repeatedly – attempting to broker a deal. Prior to the war, and even during the catastrophe itself, he had voiced warnings and exhortations behind the scenes – but to no avail. On 9 November 1918, just a few days before the war would end, Ballin took his own life in Hamburg. He knew this war had also destroyed his life’s work. Under the Treaty of Versailles, both Hapag and NDL lost their fleets. Ballin could not bear to see this happen.
Taking a walk around just the ground floor of the Ballin House, one encounters many artefacts on display from the 170-year history of Hapag-Lloyd.

THE “IMPERATOR”

One testament to the Ballin era can be seen on the right immediately after entering the building: the large, contemporary model of the “Imperator”. In 1912, the Hamburg-built steamer was launched and christened by German Emperor William II. With a length of 277 meters and a GRT of 52,117, it was the largest ship in the world at the time. With room for 4,000 passengers and a crew of 1,180, it resembled a floating city. And with a massive, menacing eagle of bronze adorning the bow, the gigantic steamer from Hamburg was a seaborne status symbol of the aspiring German Empire.
THE “HAMBURG EXPRESS”
Standing across from the “Imperator” is a model of the “Hamburg Express”. The current flagship of the Hapag-Lloyd fleet has also given its name to the “Hamburg Express” class, which includes ten very large container ships. In real life, each of these state-of-the-art giants is 366 meters long, 48 meters wide and capable of transporting up to 13,200 standard containers (TEU).

SHIP’S BELL OF THE SUNKEN “CIMBRIA”
Resting atop a marble plinth in the Ballin Hall is the bell of the “Cimbria”. On a foggy night in January 1883, a coal steamer crashed into and sank this Hapag steamer off the North Sea island of Borkum, killing more than 400 people. The German research vessel “Wega” discovered the ship’s wreckage in 1974. Its bell, which was carefully restored at the Altona Museum, now serves as a memorial to all who have perished at sea.

THE FIRST HAPAG SHIPS
In this area of the hall, one can also view two paintings showing the early Hapag fleet. The painting by Hermann Rudolph Hardorff shows the shipping company’s first two sailing ships, the “Deutschland” and the “Nord-Amerika”. They started the postal, freight and passenger service of the “Packetfahrt”, as Hapag was called at the time for short.

The second painting, by Peter Christian Holm, depicts part of the fleet in around 1860. The sailing ship “Oder” was purchased in 1851 and sailed for Hapag until 1868. In 1855, Hapag acquired its first steamers, the “Hammonia” and the “Borussia”, which were some 85 meters long and had a GRT of 2,000. In the foreground of the painting, one can see the “Germania”. With a length of 97 meters and a GRT of 2,000, the steamship went into service in 1863.
When settlement cracks and moisture penetration appeared in the Ballin Hall, making it necessary to extensively refurbish the roof structure leading to the inner courtyard, Hapag-Lloyd’s Executive Board decided to largely restore the hall to its original 1920s condition. For example, the walls were finished with an Italian plastering technique that creates an impression of depth, and a renewed splendour was made to emanate not only from the ceiling, but also from some of the furniture, such as chairs and tables. These were the only pieces of furniture designed by the architect Fritz Höger.

Along with the refurbishment work in the hall, the adjoining staircase behind the reception desk was also renovated. It was part of the original building completed in 1903, and its stylistic elements were adapted to the design of the Ballin Hall during the expansion overseen by Höger in the early 1920s. The banisters and ceiling decorations bear the clear hallmark of Höger’s work. With its neo-classical elements, the so-called “Alstertor Staircase” provides a glimpse of the architecture typical of the turn of the century.

Good acoustics and user-friendly furnishings were given high priority when the conference rooms were being designed. The large, completely modernized conference room, illuminated by daylight coming through its glass roof, offers space for 150 people. But the most eye-catching feature of the expansive assembly hall is an imposing painting of Port of Hamburg in 1880 by the Belgian artist Robert Mols.
THE REAR ENTRANCE – A FINELY DETAILED GEM

At 58 Ferdinandstrasse, one can still see the beautiful rear entrance and rear façade of the Hapag building from 1903, which have been almost entirely preserved in their original form. Running along the middle of the façade are the coats of arms of the various countries at whose ports Hapag ships called. However, the large Hapag emblem above the entrance was only added at a later point. It had originally adorned the office building on Dovenfleet before moving to a home for “employees’ children endangered by the circumstances of the war and its aftermath” in Wyk, a town on the North Sea island of Föhr. The rear entrance also houses a bronze female statue that once crowned the roof of the historic “Verkehrspavillon” travel agency building on the Jungfernstieg, the promenade on the Inner Alster Lake lying perpendicular to the Ballindamm.

THE HAPAG-LLOYD HOF

From the rear entrance, one can quickly reach the company’s second location in the downtown area. In the early 1990s, when there once again wasn’t enough office space in the Ballin House to meet the company’s needs, the Executive Board decided to have a new building constructed nearby. In 1995, Hapag-Lloyd moved into the modern Hapag-Lloyd Hof on Rosenstrasse, just a few hundred meters from Ballindamm. The building, designed by the renowned Hamburg architecture agency Gerkan, Marg and Partners (gmp), features a light-flooded inner courtyard covered by a 500 sqm glass roof. In the entrance area stands a ship propeller, of which one side is smoothly polished and the other side bears the marks of intense wear in rough seas. Numerous vintage shipping posters adorn the hallways of the Hapag-Lloyd Hof.
Name plate, Ballin House, Ballindamm