The Berlin Town Hall

Seat of Government and Landmark in the Heart of Berlin
Dear Visitors,

Welcome to the Berlin Town Hall, popularly known as the “Red Town Hall” because of its red brick façade.

This building, the seat of the Governing Mayor, is at the heart of Berlin policymaking. The state government convenes here every Tuesday in the Senate meeting room. At the same time, the Berlin Town Hall is a venue for encounters: conferences, readings, and exhibitions bring people of very different origins and interests together. Deserving citizens are honored at the Berlin Town Hall, and heads of state from all over the world sign the Golden Book of Berlin here.

However, the Town Hall also stands for Berlin’s eventful history. It was built over 150 years ago right where the city’s town hall had stood since the Middle Ages. As the seat of the mayor, the municipal government, and the city council, it played a key role in the history of democracy in Berlin. That came to an abrupt end in 1933 when the Nazis rose to power, since they destroyed democracy and local self-government. The building suffered heavy damage during World War II. The Berlin Town Hall was rebuilt in the 1950s and became the seat of the mayor of East Berlin, while West Berlin’s Senate met at the Schöneberg Town Hall. It has represented reunified Berlin since 1991.

Today the Berlin Town Hall is building on the democratic tradition of the past and stands for Berlin’s openness to the world. In this spirit, I hope you will enjoy your visit and learn a lot about our Town Hall.
The Berlin Town Hall is one of Berlin’s iconic landmarks and was built from 1861 to 1869 according to plans by Hermann Friedrich Waesemann in the neo-Renaissance style. At 94 meters (including the flagpole), its tower is visible from afar.

The Berlin Town Hall is the seat of the Governing Mayor and the Senate Chancellery. It has 255 offices and 11 conference and event rooms. Every year, around 80,000 people visit the building — for exhibitions, tours, and formal events. The ceremonial rooms are open to the public unless an event is taking place, and you can pick up more information at the entrance.
The tour of the Berlin Town Hall starts at the **GRAND STAIRCASE**: its red carpet has already welcomed Bill Clinton, King Harald V of Norway, Nelson Mandela, Sophia Loren, and many other prominent visitors. At the top of the stairs, displayed in a glass case, is the **GOLDEN BOOK** or the **GUEST BOOK OF THE CITY OF BERLIN**. These books are signed by high-level visitors when they come to the Town Hall.

A **VISITORS’ BOOK OF THE TOWN HALL** is also on display in the foyer and can be signed by anyone visiting the building. A larger-than-life bust recalls the first Governing Mayor of West Berlin, Ernst Reuter, whose protest against the Berlin Blockade made him a legend. A **MEMORIAL PLAQUE** is dedicated to the members of the city council and “Magistrat” (municipal government) who were murdered under the National Socialist and Stalinist regimes. Glass cases around the top of the staircase display **GIFTS** from foreign heads of state.

With its coral-red, cross-ribbed, vaulted ceiling and the many plaster busts on display, the **HALL OF PILLARS** is considered the Berlin Town Hall’s most beautiful room. Painted to resemble Siena’s “Palazzo Pubblico,” this room, with its soaring nine-meter ceiling, once housed the library of the “Magistrat.” Today it hosts events and exhibitions like “Berlin in Gips,” which showcases works from the plaster cast workshops and collections of the National Museums in Berlin.

City council meetings were once held in the **HALL OF ARMS** opposite this open area; today the room is used for receptions and official
ceremonies. It takes its name from the stained-glass windows that show the coats of arms of Berlin and its original boroughs. Leaving the Hall of Arms, you enter the **MAIN HALL**; at 30 meters long and 18 meters wide, it is the largest room in the building. It was planned from the very beginning as a venue for festivities. East Berlin’s city council also met here until 1990. The monumental painting “The Berlin Congress of 1878,” which was commissioned by the city of Berlin from the court painter Anton von Werner, hangs at one end of the room. It had hung here from 1881 to 1945 and was returned to the room in 2005.

Not all of the Berlin Town Hall’s rooms are open to the public. For instance, the Berlin state government meets every Tuesday in the **SENATE MEETING ROOM**, after which the outcome of the meeting is announced in the **PRESS ROOM**. The Governing Mayor works in his **OFFICE**, where he meets with guests and discusses policy. The **LOUISE SCHROEDER CONFERENCE ROOM** on the third floor is used for negotiations on coalition agreements and for conferences of Germany’s minister-presidents, among other things. Portraits of Berlin’s honorary citizens line the walls of the third-floor corridors.
ARCHITECTURE

The Berlin Town Hall and its imposing belfry, which towered over the City Palace from the beginning, symbolized the self-confidence of the city’s middle class. The building’s design takes the Italian Early Renaissance as its guide. Hermann Friedrich Waesemann built the Town Hall with four wings and a ground plan that is almost square. Center sections inside the open area divide it into three inner courtyards.

The Berlin Town Hall sustained heavy damage in World War II. It was reconstructed from 1951 to 1955 by the architect Fritz Meinhardt, who made fundamental changes to its interior design. Many of the rooms were repurposed, and rooms that were once lavishly decorated were rebuilt in a simplified form. The building was classified as a historical monument in 1979. For the Governing Mayor’s move from the Schöneberg Town Hall to the Berlin Town Hall in October 1991, the architect Helge Pitz gave the building another makeover and modernized its technical infrastructure. That included the addition of elevator towers, which were attached to the building exterior in the Town Hall courtyards.
HISTORY

1237  First documentary reference to the city of Berlin

1861  Foundation stone laid

1865  First meeting of the “Magistrat” after completion of the first phase of construction; official seat of the mayor

1867  Topping-out ceremony

1869  Building occupied

1870  First meeting of the city council

1871  Founding of the German Empire; Berlin as capital

1920  City council meeting room enlarged
       Creation of the new municipality Greater Berlin

1933  Interiors and grand staircase redesigned
       “Magistrat” stripped of its powers by the National Socialists; “Gleichschaltung” (forcing into line) of the administration

1945  Severe damage during World War II; new “Magistrat” installed by the Soviet occupying power
       Berlin occupied by the Allies

1948/1949  Non-communist city council members leave and move into Schöneberg Town Hall
           Berlin Blockade; city divided

1951  Reconstruction (until 1955); major interior remodeling; rooms repurposed
       Beginning of separate reconstruction of the two halves of the city

1961  Construction of the Berlin Wall

1987  Renovation of the exterior
       Berlin’s 750th anniversary celebrated in both halves of the city
1989  First “Round Table” in Berlin (December 4)
      Fall of the Berlin Wall (November 9)
1990  Reunification of Berlin; joint administration of the two halves of the city
1991  Extensive renovation and modernization; seat of the Governing Mayor since October 1
      German Bundestag decides to move the country’s government and parliament from Bonn to Berlin.
1999  Government and parliament take up their work in Berlin.
2011  Archaeological excavation; remains of the old town hall uncovered
2012  Berlin celebrates its 775th anniversary
2019  30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall
RELIEF SHOWING THE FOUNDING OF THE ACADEMY OF SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

PUBLICATION DATA

PUBLISHED AND EDITED BY
Press and Information Office of the Federal State of Berlin
Berlin Town Hall | Jüdenstrasse 1 | 10178 Berlin

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www.berlin.de
2019

PHOTOS:
Thomas Platow/Landesarchiv
Photo of Michael Müller: Senatskanzlei/Lena Giovanazzi

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BERLIN’S “CHRONICLE IN STONE”

The Berlin Town Hall’s striking, bright red brick façade stands in vivid contrast to other buildings in the heart of the city. Its detailed design is embellished by the terracotta plaques of the “CHRONICLE IN STONE”: a series of reliefs that tell the story of the city’s dynamic growth up until the German Empire was founded in 1871. The 36 reliefs were created by the sculptors Ludwig Brodwolf, Alexander Calandrelli, Otto Geyer, and Rudolf Schweinitz from 1877 to 1879.

The “CHRONICLE IN STONE” starts at the rear of the building on the corner of Gustav-Böss-Strasse and Spandauer Strasse and runs counterclockwise around the Town Hall. The first panels illustrate the early years: the Slavic tribes convert to Christianity; the ground is cultivated; the city is founded. About half of the reliefs are devoted to urban everyday life in the Middle Ages, and you can see scenes from the medieval justice system in the panels above the Jüdenstrasse entrance: the pillory, the old courthouse, and a robbery and murder.

On the front of the building on Rathausstrasse, the people submit to the elector Frederick II (“Iron Tooth”) by giving him the keys to the city. The scene is followed by the construction of the Hohenzollerns’ palace. Other reliefs honor the achievements of the Prussian kings and the city’s industrial boom in the 19th century. The chronicle ends with German unification: in the last relief, Berliners celebrate the news from Versailles about the founding of the German Empire.