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Bottega Veneta puts its mark on lavish Berlin apartment development

A residential building by developer Ralf Schmitz and luxury brand Bottega Veneta is among the most anticipated real estate projects in Europe, writes Dan Stapleton.

By: Dan Stapleton



Italian luxury brand Bottega Veneta is making the Eisenbahn 1 development in Berlin a showcase for its homewares and furniture collection. vuv studio

Eisenbahn 1 may be more than a year away from completion, but many of those with an interest in Europe's luxury real estate sector are already calling the development a game-changer.

The collaboration between Ralf Schmitz, Germany's pre-eminent residential real estate company, and Bottega Veneta, the respected Italian luxury-goods maker, is one of the most lavish housing projects to be undertaken in Berlin since the Wall came down.

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"We are creating the most luxurious residences available in the city today," says Daniel Schmitz, the fifth-generation managing director of the family-owned company.

While a number of collaborative projects between property developers and luxury brands are under way in Europe and America, Eisenbahn 1 is arguably the most eagerly awaited. Comparable ventures in New York and Miami will be larger, cheaper and, some say, less personal. If those American developments are the ready-to-wear collections of the luxury real estate world, Eisenbahn 1 is the haute couture.

Eisenbahn 1 comprises just 12 residences, six of which have already been sold. The smallest apartment is listed at €2.2 million (\$3.05 million), while the largest, a full-floor penthouse, is €8.5 million (\$11.8 million).

The building is in Charlottenburg, one of West Berlin's most desirable historic neighbourhoods, and occupies a prime position just steps from the famed Kurfürstendamm thoroughfare. "Thomas Wolfe described the western part of Berlin around Kurfürstendamm as Europe's biggest cafe in the 1920s," Schmitz says. "Back then, the area was really about having a good time and living."

Today, bustling Kurfürstendamm is home to Berlin's fanciest boutiques, while the surrounding streets are dotted with townhouses, tertiary institutions, theatres and hotels. "It's an energetic area," Schmitz says, "but it's still a little bit like a village within the city – like the West Village in New York, for example. In Charlottenburg, you don't have the feeling that you're living in a metropolis."

'Natural evolution'

Eisenbahn 1 is also noteworthy because it is Bottega Veneta's first residential design project. In the past decade, the Italian company has grown in stature under the leadership of Tomas Maier, who has broadened its offerings to include clothing and furniture, as well as its signature "intrecciato" leather bags.

Recently, Bottega Veneta has worked on suites at the St. Regis hotels in Rome and Florence, and the Park Hyatt in Chicago. But Eisenbahn 1 is the company's most high-profile foray into interior design to date.

Maier says the project is indicative of the company's future direction. "It is a natural evolution for Bottega Veneta," he says, speaking exclusively to Life & Leisure. "We introduced our first pieces of furniture in 2006 and since then the collection has developed into a full lifestyle offering."

The expansion of Bottega Veneta's Home Collection – which encompasses both retail items such as furniture and bespoke projects such as Eisenbahn 1 – is now a priority for Maier.

"Where we feel there is an exceptional opportunity to create an immersive experience that helps us develop the richness of the Home Collection, we will explore it," he says.

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Eisenzahn 1 takes its style cues from both Germany and France – something that Schmitz attributes partly to his company's in-house architect, Sebastian Treese. "Sebastian is half French, so he has a very close relationship to Paris and its boulevards," he explains. "He and I wanted a building that fitted into Berlin, but also incorporated some Parisian ideas: a classic palatial style with high ceilings, big bay windows and four-metre-high entrance doors."

Schmitz had a hunch that Maier, whose work he had followed closely, would relate to this blend of influences and could provide interior design for the building's common areas that was sensitive to the overall project.

"Tomas was interesting for us partly because of his German heritage," he says, "but also because he is very classically oriented. We'd been looking at what he did with the St. Regis, for example, and we liked that very much."

Living with the brand

For now, Maier remains tight-lipped about the specifics of his work on Eisenzahn 1, but official renderings of the building's common areas show a typically restrained sensibility paired with sophisticated furniture in dark leather and light wood.

"My goal with Eisenzahn 1 was to make a statement, yet leave the design purposefully spare, almost as a backdrop," Maier explains, noting that each resident should feel comfortable in the building's common areas. "The idea is that an individual should make the space his or her own."

Maier says the principles that guided his work on the building are the same as those that underpin Bottega Veneta itself. "The essential elements behind the interior are fine-quality materials, extraordinary craftsmanship, timeless design and contemporary functionality."

According to Schmitz, those who have purchased Eisenzahn 1 residences "off the plan" – a mix of locals and international buyers – have been attracted as much by the design credentials of the individuals and companies involved as they have by Germany's comparatively strong economy. "The clients do see the apartments as investment opportunities," he says, "but they also want beautiful homes in Berlin for when they visit."

At present, demand for properties with brand associations is strong both in Europe and the United States. In Manhattan, the French crystal company Baccarat recently completed work on a building that contains 60 private residences and a 112-room hotel. There is also significant activity in Miami, where Porsche, Armani and Fendi are all involved in real estate projects.

But Schmitz says he is not concerned with trends. He points out that the union with Bottega Veneta is the latest in a string of partnerships that have helped raise his company's profile internationally. "Collaborations like this are part of our philosophy in general," he says. "Aside from the project with Bottega Veneta, we've been working on developments with Jacques Grange, who of course is one of the best-known interior designers in the world. Then there's a project that we're planning now that will include landscaping by Louis Benech, who is working on Versailles at the moment."

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While the aesthetic links between real estate firms and certain luxury brands – car manufacturers, for example – can seem tenuous, Schmitz says his partnership with Bottega Veneta makes perfect sense. "We put a great deal of effort into the details of how we build our houses and we've done that for generations. Bottega Veneta also values attention to detail, which is obvious when you look at how they work with leather.

"At the same time, they have always been about a more subtle elegance – you know, not putting the logo on the bag. That's what we do as well."

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