



A promoter of industry with a green thumb: Gerd Gruppe, Director of DLR Space Administration

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On 1 April 2011, Gerd Gruppe joined the DLR Executive Board as Director of Space Administration in Bonn. An interim report after three months in office offers an opportunity to reflect on priorities and weightlessness, deep-shaft and opencast mining, and on basic research and applications.

Gruppe came into contact with the space industry for the first time in Munich in the mid eighties. After completing his doctorate in marketing at the University of Augsburg, he was responsible for implementing a newly launched technology marketing programme for the Bavarian State Government. Soon, he had established contact with companies involved in this sector, based in and around Munich. As he passionately describes Bavaria as an aerospace location at that time, his audience can almost see the emerging companies taking shape before their eyes. Towards the end of the eighties, the 'Space Boom' on Munich's River Isar started to subside due to the lack of a visionary supporter from the world of politics.

This was a formative period for Gruppe: "Space is a government-driven market. This still holds true. The state must always participate because space involves basic research and provides a great deal of our modern communication-based society's infrastructure." Following a tough decade, there is now new optimism surrounding Galileo, the new European satellite navigation system. This is creating opportunities for many start-up companies. DLR Oberpfaffenhofen also benefits from this, not just because it has been chosen as the location for the Galileo Control Centre, but also through the expansion of the robotics and remote sensing sectors. Gerd Gruppe is playing a key role in all of these events.

First professional experience gained underground

Originally, Gerd Gruppe did not look to the sky to find his future career; instead, he ventured into the depths of the Earth. Growing up in the heart of the lignite-mining region of Eschweiler, near Aachen, unlike many others in his age group, he decided to study for an engineering degree and enrolled at RWTH Aachen to study mining. "Almost all my classmates became doctors or teachers," recalls Gruppe, "but there were also some advantages: there were only eleven of us in the same semester." As well as deep-shaft and opencast mining and drilling technology, the course included subjects such as geology, mineralogy and mining legislation. The man who went on to become a mining inspector describes himself as a technology generalist. He is very enthusiastic about the practical aspects of his study; for example, the work carried out underground. During a student placement in South Africa, he marvelled at the coal transport systems employed. In just a few minutes, giant bucket wheel excavators were able to extract the equivalent of the daily production of a large coal mine in Germany. "It became clear to me that mining in Germany had no future. I don't think I had ever really wanted to 'go into coal' for a living, and it was at this moment that I fully realised this."

Competition is beneficial for space activities

When you talk to people professionally involved in the space industry, you will often hear them recount childhood experiences. Sunday, 20 July 1969 – virtually everywhere on Earth, people sat glued to their televisions, among them 17-year old high school pupil, Gerd Gruppe. That was the day that humans first set foot on the Moon. Gerd Gruppe became a fan of space travel when NASA astronaut Neil Armstrong transmitted the now legendary message "the Eagle has landed" to the ground at 21:17 CEST. "Back then, we were watching television at our neighbour's house. The picture quality was terrible because the original material was filmed off the monitors in the

NASA Control Center. Nonetheless, the first Moon landing was a moving experience for everyone, young or old,” Gruppe clearly recalls. “Our physics teacher did not believe the mission would be a success. He feared that the space capsule returning the three astronauts to Earth would miss the correct angle for re-entry and would burn up in Earth’s atmosphere. The optimists were right.”

It was not just the physical feasibility of space travel that inspired Gerd Gruppe in these early days. “To this day, two things enthuse me: the venture into new fields and the factor of competition – the will to demonstrate that you are leading the race, even if by a narrow margin.” In 1969, spaceflight was part of the conflict between the political systems of East and West. In 2011, US astronauts will fly to the International Space Station (ISS) with the Russians. China is currently taking its first steps towards manned spaceflight. The political climate has changed, but the spirit of competition is alive and well.

Building a technological bridge between space and Earth

In his current post, Gerd Gruppe finds the view of Earth from space every bit as exciting as the exploration of distant celestial bodies. He gets quite annoyed when spaceflight – as has already happened with astronomy – is called upon to justify its existence. In his view, space exploration is imbued with the same innate justification as biology or geology. The systematic exploration of the planets is something Gerd Gruppe views as an interesting objective “because it enables us to make statements about how Earth, and indeed the Universe, came into being – classical, legitimate science in line with technology policy, and a gateway to the unknown.”

In the future Gerd Gruppe sees three equally important topics for spaceflight: the exploration of space, the development of new technologies for space and – this shows his past in the Bavarian Ministry of Economic Affairs – the practical uses and applications for this knowledge here on Earth. Here, his primary interest lies in the exploitation of space-related technologies in high-tech company start-ups. This one is really close to his heart: “Here, more can and should be done!”

A functioning network between space technologists and entrepreneurs from outside the space industry is something that Gerd Gruppe would like to create, and he is under no illusions as to how tough a challenge this will prove to be. At the interface between science, industry and politics, he hopes to play a creative role in this as Director of Space Administration. He does not view his place as in any way above the fray, far removed from day-to-day business. In his new position, he also wants to have a ‘hands-on’ role to play, even when it comes to details. When Gerd Gruppe describes his working method, in which the formative influence of his time in the mining sector is clearly shown, his guiding principle is: “The purely abstract is not my way.”

He has certainly landed on his feet in Bonn, professionally and in his private life. Does he miss anything? “Yes, my garden. Working in the garden for me is the key to relaxation, and is my great hobby.” Personal ambition is involved here too – his garden should be a head-turning spectacle at all times of year. What about smaller-scale hobbies? Classical music and contemporary art: “I’m hoping to get some new ideas from Cologne’s art scene. I’m looking forward to seeing what’s on offer there. Not that I’m really a collector. Every now and again I do buy pictures, usually modern ones, which I of course do in the company of my wife; a remarkable experience which has its own special charm. For me, it’s a fascinating step outside my normal realm.”

Contacts

Diana Gonzalez

Deutsches Zentrum für Luft- und Raumfahrt (DLR) - German Aerospace Center

Corporate Communications

Tel.: +49 228 447-388

Fax: +49 228 447-386

Diana.Gonzalez@dlr.de

Gerd Gruppe



Gerd Gruppe has been Director of DLR Space Administration since 1 April 2011.

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Gerd Gruppe during a study visit to South Africa



Practical experience in mining: Gerd Gruppe in South Africa in the late 1970s

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