Interpreting Nazi Architecture: The Case of Albert Speer

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The Zeppelinfeld, at Nuremberg (fig. 1), was built by Albert Speer in 1934-7 to accommodate the annual Congresses of the Nazi Party. From its tribune, Hitler harangued more than 150,000 of the Party faithful, eliciting from them an ecstatic adoration. The plan for a new center for Berlin (fig. 2), capital of Hitler's new expanded empire, was a project envisioned by both Hitler and Speer, who worked together on it for many years. Its broad North-South axis was to be framed by a giant arch of triumph, four hundred feet high, and a huge domed Great Hall which would provide space for rallies of 180,000 people. Of such buildings and projects Speer remarked in his Memoirs, "For the commission to do a great building, I would have sold my soul like Faust."

As principal architect to Adolf Hitler from 1934 to 1945, Albert Speer (1905-1981) had the opportunity to build a few "great buildings" and to plan many more. Among the major buildings actually completed by Speer before 1945, in addition to the Zeppelinfeld and other buildings at Nuremberg, were Hitler's new Chancellery in Berlin, completed in 1938 (figs. 3 and 4), and a German Pavilion for the Paris World's Fair of 1937 (fig. 5). As Hitler's Minister of Armaments and War Production from 1942 to 1945, Speer was personally responsible for the organization of labor -- much of it forced labor -- and materiel in support of the war effort. In this capacity he also laid down many building plans that affected the future.

Among architects practicing in Germany under the Nazi regime, Speer was the most powerful. Indeed he was for a time one of the most powerful men in the Third Reich. His buildings, and those plans in which Hitler collaborated with him, were endlessly celebrated in the official press, in often-repeated exhibitions, and in popular films. Did Speer sell his soul in the service of National Socialism? Were Speer's buildings in fact his own or were they primarily Hitler's? If they were his own, were Speer's buildings nevertheless tools of Nazi repression, full of political imagery that their audience understood and internalized? Or is architecture, despite the repeated claims of Nazi propaganda, fundamentally apolitical, so that Speer's work, if studied at all, should be seen apart from its Nazi context? These issues are now hotly debated by scholars and architects, especially in Germany and the United States. The ramifications of this debate are of immense significance for our understanding of German history and modern architecture. They also have important implications for art historical methodology in general. The following discussion will trace the development of interpretation of Speer's work since 1945 and then set forth my own analyses. In the process, I
hope to arrive at some conclusions about the nature of Nazi architecture, and the methods which are appropriate to its study.

For more than twenty years after the end of the second World War, scholarly discussion of Nazi architecture was almost non-existent. Hitler's claims that Nazi buildings expressed the central purposes of National Socialist ideology were accepted at face value, so that postwar revulsion against National Socialism focused also on the buildings featured in Nazi propaganda. The only early systematic analysis of Nazi architecture from this period -- Helmut Lehmann-Haupt's Art under a Dictatorship of 1954 -- describes Nazi buildings and plans as gigantic and overwhelming, expressing in their size and scale the repressive and terrorist nature of a totalitarian regime.iii Representing a debased neoclassicism and misunderstood baroque, Nazi architecture in his view lacked significant merit. Lehmann-Haupt believed that Speer was almost entirely subordinate to Hitler in creating these buildings. Such ideas were widespread both among victors and vanquished; little research was done on Speer or Nazi architecture more generally (although studies of Hitler as a political leader and warlord abounded). Little, therefore, was really known about Nazi buildings or about Speer's work. Among architectural historians, Nikolaus Pevsner expressed the dominant attitude in his famous Outline of European Architecture: "Of the German buildings for the National Socialist Party . . . the less said the better."iv

Since the early 1970s, however, a great deal of attention, both scholarly and popular, has focused on Nazi architecture. Speer himself was a catalyst. After his release from Spandau prison in 1966 (where he had served a twenty-year sentence for war crimes), he began to publish a hugely popular series of memoirs and to be in great demand as a public speaker. In these memoirs and reflections, on which most writers on Nazi architecture still depend, Speer described his own role in Nazi architecture and politics, and the inspirations, both ideological and political, for his work.

Speer took great pains to explain his relationship to Hitler. He was mesmerized by the Führer, he said, and entirely persuaded that this new leader could guide Germany out of defeat and economic depression, back to power and greatness. Speer made clear that as a patron Hitler gave the young architect an astonishingly free rein in most of the executed buildings. But it was Hitler, Speer said, who conceived the general outlines of the Great Hall and Arch of Triumph for Berlin, and who was concerned that they be as big as possible.v

Hitler was insistent about the need for grand and impressive buildings, buildings that would last "for thousands of years."vi During their snowy walks above the Berghof and in their more intimate conferences in Munich, Nuremberg and Berlin, Speer and Hitler often discussed what Nazi buildings would look like in ruins. On these occasions they also spoke of the ancient empires, of Babylon and Karnak, and of Rome, agreeing that these empires still
expressed their power even as their buildings lay in ruins. Hitler and Speer hoped that the buildings of the Third Reich, when and if that Empire fell, would also express its lasting power.\textsuperscript{vii} It will be useful to keep this macabre preoccupation in mind when considering Speer's ancient models.

Apart from Hitler's ideas about monumentality and "ruin value," however, according to Speer he was thoroughly compliant in matters of style, planning, and decoration. He allowed Speer, for the most part, to design according to his own stylistic preferences. Although Speer acknowledged certain other influences, his memoirs, essays and interviews emphasized again and again his admiration for Greek architecture, especially that of the Doric order, and his dependence on the legacy of German neoclassicism. Speer said that he had been deeply influenced by the neoclassicism of Karl Friedrich Schinkel, whose work he often saw as a student in Berlin (fig. 6). This neoclassical tradition was mediated for Speer, he said, by the work and teaching of his beloved mentor in Berlin, Heinrich Tessenow (fig. 7).\textsuperscript{viii} But there were great disparities in scale and proportion between Speer's Paris pavilion (fig. 5) and the works of his so-called mentors. Clearly Speer's statements about the influences upon him were not entirely accurate. I will return to these points below.

Speer also stressed the theatrical and technological aspects of his work. In retrospect, he said, he was most proud of his designs for the party congress grounds at Nuremberg. Here bright flags by day and searchlights by night echoed and dramatized the vertical piers of the grandstand, and framed the complex marching patterns of thousands of Nazi delegates inside (figs. 8 and 9). Speer called the vertical columns of the searchlights his "cathedral of light," and wrote, in the first of his memoirs, that this "cathedral" was his "most beautiful architectural concept."\textsuperscript{ix} (It is interesting that although Speer spoke of "great buildings," and claimed to share Hitler's concern with "ruin value," the architectural accomplishment he valued most was this ephemeral creation of light.) Speer was also gratified when the Party leadership allowed him to help choreograph the movements of participants in the ceremonies. He was responsible for arranging these movements during at least one major party meeting at Nuremberg; there may have been other occasions.\textsuperscript{x} But despite his fondness for his accomplishments at Nuremberg, Speer also claimed that as an architect in the Third Reich, he had been primarily an artist and a technician, rather than a politician.\textsuperscript{xi}

Speer's postwar memoirs and public appearances provided the public with a great deal of information about Nazi architecture and about the structure of Nazi government. In the climate of the 1970s and early 1980s, when younger Germans have begun an effort to come to terms with the recent past, and younger architects in Germany and elsewhere have sought to rehabilitate the traditions of neoclassicism, Speer's self-presentation has been attractive for several reasons: (1) Speer's claim that his work was representative of the long and
distinguished tradition of neoclassicism made the rehabilitation of his work attractive to postmodernist architects in Germany and elsewhere. (2) Speer's claim that as an architect he was fundamentally apolitical allowed scholars to study his work, and architects to admire it, without thinking about its political implications. (3) The sense that Speer's work was rooted in a still-living past enabled younger Germans to de-emphasize the importance of both 1933 and 1945 as turning points, and to find some continuity in modern German history. Speer's assertion that he was relatively independent of Hitler's influence contributed to these interpretations, for if one sets aside any consideration of Hitler's role in Nazi architecture, it is much easier to think of Speer's work as part of a continuum.

At the same time, even Speer's detractors have for the most part accepted Speer's account of his own importance. For those Germans who have sought to renew public awareness about the evils of the Nazi regime -- and there have been many of them in recent years -- Speer's architecture has been the object of special opprobrium, which has obscured the importance of other architects and other buildings. In the last twenty years, then, a great deal has been published about Speer. Some of it has been laudatory, some full of outraged condemnation. Some has been strenuously and self-consciously value-free.

Let us turn first to a lavishly illustrated book on Speer's work, edited by Speer himself, and published in 1978. In this volume, the historians Lars Olof Larsson, Georg Friedrich Koch, and Karl Ernst Arndt argued that Speer's work resides firmly within a neoclassical tradition reaching from Schinkel to the present. Of this group, Larsson had already begun to investigate Speer's planning for Berlin in some detail; he described it as dependent, like the architecture, on older traditions in Germany (and elsewhere in Europe).

The idea that Speer was significant mainly as a continuer of the German neoclassical tradition was stated most polemically, however, not by a scholar but by an architect, Leon Krier. In a later and even more luxurious version of the volume mentioned above, Krier describes Speer as "the most famous architect of the twentieth century" and one who understood that "classical architecture has been the noblest instrument of politics and of civilizing propaganda for thousands of years and throughout all great cultures and continents." Krier has frequently protested the "slander" of "the grandeur, the elegance, the solidity, and the stability of [Speer's] public buildings," which he sees as a part of "an articulate and intelligent critique of modern architecture" that "existed in effect in Nazi Germany....in the line which runs through Tessenow, Schmitthenner, and Schultze Naumburg." Krier, in other words, has made explicit an idea that is implicit in some of the more scholarly works on the Nazi period: that Speer's work must be valued as an essential link between the traditions of neoclassicism and the concerns of current postmodernism, and that it is free of any specifically Nazi taint.
Another group of scholars vigorously questions these assumptions and interpretations. Wolfgang Schäche, Berthold Hinz and Angela Schönberger, among others, have urged that Speer was practicing political oppression in his buildings from the start, by adopting a monumental scale and site arrangements that direct the user in repressive ways, and by organizing forced labor in building construction. Speer's work as an architect was a rehearsal for his work as Minister of Armaments and War Production; it looked ahead to an expansionist foreign policy, and to war.\textsuperscript{xvii} By making the kind of comparisons mentioned above (between Speer, Tessenow, Schinkel and others), Schäche also emphasizes the scalelessness and consequent inherent inhumanity of Speer's work. These qualities, he believes, separate it decisively from the neoclassical tradition. Kurt Vondung, and most recently Dieter Bartetzko, have also dwelt at length on the ways in which Speer's imagery and building arrangements manipulated the masses, and created a setting for a Nazi political cult.\textsuperscript{xviii} In her splendidly documented study of the new Chancellery, Angela Schönberger demonstrates that the conception and intended purpose of this building differed greatly from Speer's account of it in his memoirs. Her challenge to Speer's self-representation has been confirmed more recently by Matthias Schmidt, who writes about Speer's whole political career. He shows that the memoirs seldom tell the truth, especially when it is embarrassing truth, and produces incontrovertible evidence for Speer's early knowledge of, and implication in, the "Final Solution".\textsuperscript{xx}

Perhaps partly in response to the bitterness of debate over Speer, still another group of German scholars has begun to deny to Nazi architecture any intrinsic "meaning." Hartmut Frank has said that "stones speak no language"; "fascism is a problem not of stones but of men"; and "architectures are not political, architects are."\textsuperscript{xxi} Werner Durth sees strong continuities between the Nazi period and the postwar years, both in the work of specific individuals and in the legacy left by Nazi architects including Speer.\textsuperscript{xxi} Neither Frank nor Durth has written directly in response to Speer's memoirs and public statements, nor do they share the exaggerated views of Krier. Both, furthermore, are meticulous scholars. But their work goes as far as any in denying political content to Speer's architecture.

My own work contributed to these debates at several points. When I first wrote on Nazi architecture in 1968, I emphasized Speer's dependence on Hitler's ideas and influence, but I also argued that Speer's were not the only important Nazi buildings. Instead, I stressed that Nazi government and Nazi propaganda promoted a multiplicity of official styles.\textsuperscript{xxii} For example, Ordensburg Vogelsang (fig. 10), which looked like a medieval castle, and the half-timbered Hitler youth hostel (fig. 11), were representative of the "Blood and Soil" strain in Nazi ideology, and were described as such in official publications.\textsuperscript{xxiii} But I also noted that the great majority of Nazi buildings were not really characterized by much ideological content.
These existed in a wide range of types and styles, from the simple slope-roofed and stuccoed buildings of many military installations, to modern-looking factory and laboratory buildings. Insofar as Speer's buildings are concerned, I suggested that their distant relationship to neoclassicism expressed a strain in Nazi theory that saw the Greeks as the first Aryans. But I also said that their clean lines and relatively abstract facade composition demonstrate the influence of the modern movement upon the young Speer.\textsuperscript{xxiv}

After Speer emerged from prison and produced his various apologias, I returned to the question of his architectural sources and suggested further that some of Speer's work was influenced by the buildings of the ancient Near East, particularly by those of the Assyrian Empire. One of Speer's teachers in Berlin was the principal excavator at Assur. There are striking visual similarities between reconstruction drawings by this archaeologist, Walther Andrae, and some of Speer's executed work, such as the Luitpoldhalle in Nuremberg (figs. 12, 13). If Speer was influenced by these buildings, then he was more eclectic in his sources, and less reliable in his testimony, than had earlier been believed. This influence would also suggest that both he and Hitler found authoritarian models congenial.\textsuperscript{xxv}

More recently still I have revived a small point I made in 1968, one also made in the 1950s by Bruno Zevi and very recently taken up by Franco Borsi -- namely, that there are many similarities between Speer's buildings and public buildings erected in other countries in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{xxvi} Like Speer and Hitler, government patrons and architects in France, Italy, Great Britain and the United States showed a preference during this period for somber and dignified-looking buildings. Both Marcello Piacentini's Senate Building for the University of Rome (fig. 14) and the Erie County Jail erected in Buffalo, New York under the Public Works Administration (PWA) (fig. 15), display the axially, overscaled entryways, exaggeratedly thick walls, and reminiscence of antique motifs also found in Speer's buildings. Similar features are apparent in many and diverse buildings erected under the aegis of the PWA, ranging from the Municipal Building in Austin, Texas (fig. 16) to Paul Cret's Federal Reserve Board Building in Washington, D.C. (fig. 17).\textsuperscript{xxvii} Such buildings shared an appearance of durability, a hint of antiquity, an apparent modernity, and an atmosphere of power. Yet they also appeared accessible, suited to the uses of the common man.

Where does all this leave us? If Speer's work was part of a broader pattern in the architecture of the 1930s, does that mean that it was without political content? If Speer's memoirs and postwar statements are suspect, what should we believe about his role in Nazi architecture, or about his importance in relation to Hitler? Should we regard Nazi architecture as having its own identity, or, as historians such as Henry-Russell Hitchcock and, more recently, David Watkin have implied, should we see it as part of a widespread twentieth century revival -- or debasement -- of traditional architectural forms?\textsuperscript{xxviii}
I think that Speer's architecture, like other historical phenomena, requires several levels of investigation and explanation. It should not surprise us that the governments of most technologically advanced countries sought, during the depression era, to project an image of stability, power, durability, modernity and accessibility. Yet this fact does not deprive Speer's architecture of its German context or of a relationship to Nazi ideology. Speer's buildings differed from similar buildings in neighboring nations in their uses and in their theatrical impact. At the Mayday Ceremony of 1936 held in the Berlin Lustgarten in 1936 (fig. 18), lights and flags, arranged in a columnar way around the square, blotted out the buildings behind them. (So much, then, for Schinkel, whose Altes Museum was blotted out, too.) Views of the Zeppelinfeld, again, from the entry side, reveal vertical flags working together with the other verticals of the composition (figs. 19, 20). Here, as at the Mayday Ceremony, Nazi insignia (which were probably originally designed by Hitler) functioned as an integral element of Speer's compositions. Speer's buildings and stadia, as we have seen, helped to shape the movements of Nazi Party members as they went about official business, or participated in official ceremonies.

Further, whatever the truth about the sources of Speer's imagery, there is no question that he (and Hitler) intended his buildings to express Nazi ideology. Speer and Hitler said so again and again, in public and in private, and so did Nazi publications and propaganda in every form. There is no reason to doubt that the Germans who were ruled by Hitler (and to a lesser extent by Speer) saw these buildings as expressive of Nazi ideology, too. As to what specific tenets of Nazi political thought were perceived by the users of these buildings, much research remains to be done. (Indeed much research remains to be done on most of the subjects I have discussed.) But certainly it would be safe to assert that the users, like the makers of Speer's buildings, understood them as representative of the power of the new one-party state, of the charismatic leadership of Hitler, and of the experience of renewed national community, or Gemeinschaft. Now let us remember that National Socialism defined the true national community, the Gemeinschaft, as a supra-national racial community, as inclusive of Germans everywhere, and as exclusive of the Jews. The conclusion then is inescapable: Speer participated -- as an architect -- in preparing Germans for the Holocaust and for the drive toward total war. He later served the same causes as Minister.

This does not mean, of course, that Nazi ideology, to say nothing of the Holocaust, is implicit in all buildings, in all times and places, that look somewhat like Speer's. Government architecture is always political, filled with political intent and political effect. It is therefore one of the first responsibilities of architectural historians to examine the political content of such buildings. But the political meanings of government architecture are almost entirely specific to a particular time and place. After studying the common features between German
architecture of the 1930s and, say, PWA buildings in this country, it is essential to understand
the differences as well; to understand, in other words, how the forms, purposes and effects of
Nazi buildings differed from those of the architecture of the PWA. And after pointing to the
links between Speer's forms and those of earlier German revivals of the antique, or the
connections between the architecture of the 1930s and that of postmodernism, it is important
to stress the discontinuities that framed and shaped the buildings of the Nazi era. As
architectural historians, our first obligation is to understand Speer's work, and that of other
Nazi architects, in its own context.

But how? This is not an easy task. Fewer than fifty years have passed since the end of
the Nazi era. While we may study the palace at Versailles without fear of a Bourbon
restoration, it is still hard to revisit images of the Zeppelinfeld without remembering -- almost
reexperiencing -- the roar of the crowd in response to Hitler's exhortations. To borrow a
phrase, the question is not whether stones speak -- of course they do -- but for how long, and
in what ways their message should affect our judgment. When buildings still clamor for
remembrance, the architectural historian bears a double burden: to achieve distance and
objectivity, but also to express her or his own values.

Barbara Miller Lane,
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LIST OF FIGURE CAPTIONS AND CREDITS

night.
11. Hanns Dustmann, Hitler Youth Hostel, c. 1936.
12. Walther Andrae, reconstruction drawing of the Temple of Tukulti-Ninurta at
Assur, 1921.
15. Erie County Jail, Buffalo, New York, c. 1938.
17. Paul Cret, Federal Reserve Board Building, Washington, D.C., 1932-34.

SOURCES OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1, 10, 11, 19
2
Lars Olof Larsson, personal photograph collection.
3,5
Library of Congress
4, 9, 18, 20
Albert Speer, Neue deutsche Baukunst (Berlin: Volk und Reich Verlag, 1941).
6
Bryn Mawr College, photograph collection.
7
8
Emil Wernert, L’Art dans le Ille Reich (Paris: Centre d'études de politique étrangère, 1936).
12
Werner Rittich, Architektur und Bauplastik der Gegenwart (Berlin: Rembrandt Verlag, 1938).
13
15, 16

Barbara Miller Lane, personal photograph collection.

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i This paper is a revised version of a talk given at the College Art Association Annual Meeting at San Francisco, California, on February 16, 1989. My interpretation of Speer's work, here and elsewhere, owes a great deal to conversations with Carl Nylander.


v Speer, Inside, 74-75.

vi Inside, 58; Erinnerungen, 71.


ix Inside, 59; Spandau, 477.


xi Inside, 32-33, 59-60; Albert Speer, Technik und Macht, Adelbert Reif, ed. (Esslingen am Neckar: 1979, ), 34-36.
My discussion includes only a selection of the many recent works dealing with Speer and Nazi architecture. Much of the debate up to 1985 is treated in the new preface to my Architecture and Politics in Germany 1918-1945 (rev. ed. 1985, German edition, 1986), and in my biographical entry in The Dictionary of Art (London, forthcoming 1996).


Matthias Schmidt, Albert Speer: The End of a Myth (New York: St. Martin's, 1984), originally published as Albert Speer: Das Ende eines Mythos (Bern and Munich: 1982). On Speer's knowledge of the Final Solution, see especially Myth, 181-198. Schmidt
and Schönberger's books are particularly notable in their thorough use of the most important archival collections, such as the Bundesarchiv at Koblenz.


xxi Werner Durth, Deutsche Architekten: Biographische Verflechtungen (Braunschweig: Vieweg, 1986). An emphasis on continuity has also inspired recent shows at the Deutsches Architektur museum in Frankfurt am Main. Two exhibitions have traced continuities from the period before the First World War: one on "Reform and Tradition," and one on "Expressionism and New Objectivity." A third, on the Nazi period itself, is planned. See Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani and Romana Schneider eds., Moderne Architektur in Deutschland 1900 bis 1950, Deutsches Architektur museum, Frankfurt am Main, vol. 1: Reform und Tradition, 1992; vol. 2: Expressionismus und neue Sachlichkeit (1994).

xxii Lane, Architecture and Politics.

xxiii Lane, Architecture and Politics, chapters 7 and 8. See also Barbara Miller Lane (with Leila J. Rupp), Nazi Ideology before 1933: A Documentation (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1978).

xxiv Lane, Architecture and Politics, chapter 8.


xxvii My work differs from Borsi's in stressing the American buildings of the period.


FIGURES

Figure 1

Figure 2
Figure 7

Figure 8
Figure 17

Figure 18