

Assessing the role of architecture as propaganda in the Third Reich

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Architecture played a fundamental role in the propaganda of the Third Reich. The aim of any kind of propaganda is to promote an idea or an ideology and Hitler and his Nazi Party used architecture to promote their own program and ideology with an unquestionable emphasis on nationalism. The Nazi Party had several aims with their architectural propaganda. Firstly they aimed to promote and create a single cohesive community through the idea of 'Volksgemeinschaft'. Architecture was one way they could simultaneously express the values of the Nazi party while teaching the German people the ideal way to live. There was also a symbolic aim with Nazi architecture. Hitler's desire to create a thousand year Reich would need buildings worthy of standing the test of time and through vast overstated structures Hitler and his Party attempted to reclaim the lost power of the Holy Roman Empire. Lastly there was an aim to quell any demonstration of an ideology or principle which did not correspond to the Nazi agenda. Fervently anti-communist and anti-expressionist, the Nazi Party were able to promote their own ideology while at the same time persuade against any that they did not believe in. The common thread through these key aims is the intense focus on nationalism. With each of these three major aims of Nazi architecture we will see strong nationalistic undertones and will clearly see that advancement of the German nation through nationalism underpinned all architectural aims of the Nazi regime.

While the tumultuous period of German political history between 1919 and 1933 has been well documented as have the devastating economic issues and rapid social change, this is where we must begin if we are to fully understand the significance of the architectural aims and intentions of the Nazi Party. Why was nationalism so important to them? Why did Hitler place so much emphasis on architecture as a means for propaganda? The social, political and economic contexts of the collapse of the Weimar Republic paint a picture of instability and a call for change by the German people. This change would come in the form of the Nazi Party. During the last years of the failing Weimar Republic, the public mood was one of

pessimism and dejectedness amongst severe poverty brought about by the Wall St Crash of 1929 and the resulting Great Depression. The political system was exceedingly complicated which in turn led to continual jostling for power and unnecessary instability.¹ The troublesome constitution of the Republic is testament to this fact with proportional representation leading to a multitude of political parties with conflicting ideas. The political climate alone was enough to make people turn to a seemingly cohesive political party with clear aims and intentions. The lack of patriotism and nationalism that originated with the Treaty of Versailles had plagued social consciousness since the Treaty was signed in 1919 and this was one of the areas that Hitler wanted to focus on. He wanted to revive the German national identity and bring about a cultural revival for the new German nation. He wanted bring Germany back to the forefront of imperial power and strength and to revitalize the pride of the German people.

It is fair to ask, then why architecture was so crucial in the first place and why Hitler placed such an emphasis on it. Hitler had a strong belief in the power of buildings and architecture as symbols and art.² He also believed strongly that art and architecture exercise the greatest influences on the masses and consequently should be used for that purpose.³ Playing on this influence Hitler believed that he could use architecture to improve the spiritual and psychological state of the German people.⁴ By improving the state of the German people he could improve Germany and fulfil one of his aims to move Germany into a new era. There was however a distinct lack of cohesion when it came to one single architectural style. There were some such as Baldur von Shirach who was the leader of the Hitler Jugend (Hitler Youth) movement who believed that the Hitler Jugend halls should be built out of modern materials such as steel and glass. This would give the impression that Nazism stood for 'progress' and 'youth'.⁵ The Ordensburg schools where the elite Nazi officers were trained were built in a neo-Romanesque style which conveyed the idea of traditionalism. Essentially,

¹ Mary Fulbrook, *History of Germany, 1918-2000: The Divided Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.38.

² Robert R. Taylor, *The Word in Stone: The Role of Architecture in the National Socialist Ideology* (California: University of California Press, 1974), p.14.

³ Adolf Hitler, "Speech on Art" (1935), in Norman H. Baynes, *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler: April 1927- August 1939, vol. 2* (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), p.574.

⁴ Taylor, *The Word in Stone*, p.32.

⁵ Samantha L. Frappell, *Individuals in Modern History: Leni Riefenstahl & Albert Speer* (Melbourne: Macmillan Education Australia, 2002), p.74.

those within the Nazi leadership body selected an architectural style which mirrored their own idea of what the Nazi Party stood for and how they thought they could represent their ideology in architecture.⁶ Since he was an opportunist, Hitler saw this as an opportunity to endorse Nazism as not only progressive by moving Germany into a new era of greatness but also traditional by conserving the architectural heritage of old Germany.⁷ In essence, Hitler saw architecture as ‘an expression of the national unity and power of Nazi Germany...’⁸ hence his emphasis on it.

One of the most fundamental facets of Nazi ideology was their focus on community or ‘Volksgemeinschaft’ where the German nation would be made up of one single ethnic community and there would be a pseudo-religious mystique that bound all racially pure Germans together. If Hitler and his Party were to create this community there was a need for promotion and propaganda and the Nazi Party were able to propagate this aim through architecture. The Nazi Party commissioned buildings which all had the concept of community at their heart. Not only did this occur in small scale housing in rural villages but also in large scale urban structures. This idea of small-scale architectural propaganda is clearly seen through the policy of ‘Blut und Boden’ or ‘blood and soil’. This movement called for a return to the rural roots of the German community where good German soil would nourish the German people who were represented by the ‘blood’. To get the community actively participating in this new nationalist movement the German people were encouraged to build traditional thatched roof cottages suggesting a return to traditional farming practices.⁹ It is clear therefore that architecture played a crucial role and was used as a means to promote the Nazi policy of ‘Blut und Boden’ which in turn formed part of the Nazi aim of ‘Volksgemeinschaft.

The idea of Volksgemeinschaft was also demonstrated through architecture in the large-scale commissions made by the Nazi Party in urban centres such as Berlin and Nuremburg. One of the representations which typifies this aim is the Nazi Party Rally grounds in Nuremburg and more specifically the so called ‘Cathedral of Light’ designed by Nazi architect Albert Speer. The idea behind the entire Rally ground complex was aimed to

⁶ Ibid., p.74.

⁷ Ibid., p.74.

⁸ Ibid., P.74.

⁹ Taylor, *The Word in Stone*, p.12.

promote the idea of community on a grand scale. The 'Cathedral of Light' used a vast amount of symbolism to propagate its message of Volksgemeinschaft. An immense number of Nazi swastika flags and banners were hung around the streets and houses of Nuremberg as well as in the Zeppelinfeld itself. The Rally grounds were in darkness with the exception of 130 searchlights which all pointed into the sky. This mesmeric effect alongside the colossal neo-classical structure of the Zeppelinfeld created a thoroughly enthralling atmosphere. The British Ambassador described it as being like in a cathedral made of ice.¹⁰ As if the entire construction wasn't impressive enough as it was, Leni Riefenstahl captured it in her film *Triumph des Willens* in 1935. The fact that the grounds were used as a centrepiece for perhaps the most famous example of Nazi propaganda on film validates the fact that the Nazi Party used architecture as propaganda to promote their objective of Volksgemeinschaft. Not only did they use it, it was fundamental in carrying out their aims.

To speak about the Rally grounds more generally they in themselves were crucial for the promulgation of the Nazi idea of Volksgemeinschaft. The German Stadium within the grounds would hold up to 400 000 people which was far superior to any other stadium of the day anywhere in the world.¹¹ The grounds would cover an area of 16 square kilometres and include a parade ground with room for 160 000 spectators as well as a processional avenue, Congress Hall and Culture Hall.¹² Fundamentally it would be a place for the German Army and the German community in general to come together to celebrate their culture, heritage and above all the various facets of Nazi ideology. We can see here a strong focus on military tradition and celebration. This was another aspect which the Nazis focused on when they designed any building. There was an emphasis placed on the militarisation of civilians and this is seen best through the Prora tourist resort on the island of Rügen off the coast of Germany. This complex was originally designed to be a resort connected to the 'Kraft durch Freude' (Strength Through Joy) program however it was never used for such a purpose.¹³ The identical, barrack like buildings boasted room for 20 000 holidaymakers all of whom would have rooms with an ocean view. It was this industrialised design which demonstrates the Nazis view of the ideal way of life through mass conformity and communal living all of

¹⁰ Sir Neville Henderson quoted in Frappell, *Individuals in Modern History*, p.75.

¹¹ Frappell, *Individuals in Modern History*, p.77.

¹² Frappell, *Individuals in Modern History*, p.77.

¹³ Russell England, *Jerry Building: Unholy Relics of Nazi Germany*, (BBC, 1994)

which contributed to the notion of Volksgemeinschaft. It is fair to say that without this kind of architecture the Nazi concept of mass militarisation would not have been so obviously promulgated.

Furthermore, the Nazis commissioned the building of many 'Thingplätze'. These were outdoor communal areas not dissimilar to an amphitheatre where the German people or 'Volk' would gather and watch Nazi propaganda presentations or theatre performances which celebrated German history, culture and values. The 'Thing' was an old Germanic gathering of community members and through the attempted revival of this practice, the Nazi Party were trying to get back to the Germanic roots of the German people. The attempted re-introduction of 'Thingplätze' was a failure however it was a clear attempt to increase the awareness of national identity and promote Nazism as a nationalistic ideology. More than that, it was an attempt to promote the idea of Volksgemeinschaft and hence architecture played a massive role in the carrying out of Nazi ideological aims. The Nazi Party Rally grounds as well as the 'Blut und Boden' policy both demonstrate the role architecture had in promoting the Nazi theory of Volksgemeinschaft hence making it propaganda. The holiday resort of Prora as well as the attempted reintroduction of Thingplätze reveals the Nazi idea of the proper way of life for the German Volk and by constructing architecture that represents that idea, it is propaganda. Consequently, it is clear that architecture played a crucial role in the propaganda of the Nazi Party.

One of the other key aims that the Nazi Party had was to recapture the essence of previously dominant Empires such as Rome and Ancient Greece and use it to create a great and powerful 1000 year Reich. In order to create this Reich, Hitler would need buildings that were worthy of standing for 1000 years. One of the first steps for the Nazi Party in capturing the power of both Rome and Greece was to adopt similar architectural styles. This way the Nazis were able to portray an image of great power, solidity, glory and supremacy as these ancient civilisations had done.¹⁴ To implement these styles meant implementing a neo-classical architectural style to future building programs. As previously mentioned, there was no single coherent architectural style however neo-classicism did feature heavily in Nazi architectural design owing to its grandiosity and impression of power. This idea of creating a

¹⁴ K.J. Mason and Philip Fielden, *Republic to Reich: A History of Germany 1918-1939* (Sydney: McGraw Hill, 2007), p. 241.

strong and powerful Reich, as with all Nazi architectural endeavours, included an undercurrent of nationalism. By creating their Reich, the Nazi Party were promoting nationalism and to promote their Reich they used architecture. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the blueprints for the 'Welthauptstadt Germania'. The brainchild of Hitler with the designs drawn up by Speer, Welthauptstadt Germania was a conscious redesign of Berlin with the intention to demonstrate the unequivocal power and glory of the German Reich.¹⁵ Although this recreation of Berlin was never fully realised, it had two aims. Firstly there is the obvious attempt to create a New Berlin worthy of standing for 1000 years that would be seen all over the world convincing the world of Germany's power. Just like great leaders before him such as Alexander the Great and Napoleon III, Hitler wanted to construct buildings which would glorify the memory of himself and of the Nazi Party.¹⁶ All buildings were to be a monument and symbol of '...German pride and achievement under the Nazis.'¹⁷ Hitler himself is quoted as saying '...it is essential that our adherents should know that our buildings are arising in order to strengthen this [the National Socialist movement] authority.'¹⁸ He also mentions that he believes that the monuments he is building would be eternal.¹⁹ It is clear that through the colossal buildings designed for Welthauptstadt Germania, architecture was being used by the Nazi Party as propaganda by displaying their own power, order and eternity.

The second aim that the Nazi Party had by redesigning Berlin was to '...restore German confidence and self-esteem after the shame imposed by the Treaty of Versailles.'²⁰ Hitler hoped that such projects would alleviate the inferiority complex that plagued the German community and in its place would be an increase in patriotism, pride and faith in the German nation as a whole. The Nazi Party placed a huge emphasis on what the German people could do not only individually but also as a community. Their sense of achievement in completing such great works as the ones designed by Speer and Troost would fuel their faith and community spirit and produce '...limitless self-confidence.'²¹ A building that was complete by the people, for the people allowed the German Volk to see that working collectively to

¹⁵ Ibid., p.241.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.242.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.242.

¹⁸ Adolf Hitler, *Völkischer Beobachter*, 19 July 1937.

¹⁹ Ibid., 19 July 1937.

²⁰ Frappell, *Individuals in Modern History*, p.78.

²¹ Hitler, "Speech on Art" in Baynes, *Speeches of Adolf Hitler*, p.574.

achieve a goal was better than working as an individual.²² This idea links back to the idea of Volksgemeinschaft where architecture was used to create a sense of community as well as a sense of nationalism and pride in what the German people were trying to achieve. Their nationalistic, community approach to architecture is also clearly demonstrated in the German entry into the Paris World Fair in 1937. The German pavilion was opposite the Soviet pavilion and so Speer adjusted his plans to make sure the German pavilion was larger than the Soviet one. This grandiose approach was, like all Nazi architecture, meant to symbolise the achievement and power of the Nazi Party. This display of power was all aimed at increasing the pride of the German Volk and exhibits what the German Volk was capable of. The attempt by the Nazi Party to inspire nationalism as well as increase pride and patriotism in the people through their architectural designs, especially through Welthauptstadt Germania, demonstrates the deep-seated role that architecture played as propaganda in the Third Reich.

One of the final aims that the Nazi Party had with their architectural propaganda was to quell any cultural ideology that was seen as contrary to Nazi ideology. During the years of the Weimar Republic, Germany experienced a thriving culture of art, science, philosophy and technology. Within this thriving culture was modern architectural styles such as Bauhaus and Expressionism. Artists such as Otto Dix and Käthe Kollwitz championed the new artistic movement of expressionism with architects such as Mendelsohn and Taut demonstrating this individualist style through architecture. It was these movements that the Nazi Party was against.²³ The Nazis came up with the concept of 'degenerate art' which included anything that was considered Bolshevik, Jewish and most importantly, un-German. Individualist, expressionist and modernist art and architecture was banned and those who did not adhere to the ban were subject to restrictions and penalties which included being let go from teaching positions or being banned from producing, selling or exhibiting their art or designs. The Nazi Party were against these liberal artistic styles because they did not correspond to the Nazi ideology.²⁴

One such example of architecture that was considered degenerate was Mendelsohn's Einsteinturm (Einstein's Tower) in Potsdam just outside Berlin. This expressionist piece of

²² Taylor, *The Word in Stone*, p.32.

²³ Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p.413.

²⁴ Mason and Fielden, *Republic to Reich*, p.240.

architecture was not approved by the Nazi Party as the rampant individualism went against every Nazi message of Volksgemeinschaft, order and power. In contrast to the modernist architectural styles the Nazis preferred styles which would make known to the world that the 1000 year Reich had started.²⁵ This meant adopting styles which glorified the 'Blut und Boden' characteristics of racial purity, militarism and obedience. By publicly denouncing modernist architectural styles such as Bauhaus and Expressionism, the Nazis were sending a clear message about what they believed the architecture of the Reich should look like. The message was further enforced by the Nazi Party designing and constructing buildings which were blatantly neo-classical, traditionalist and monumental. Hitler wanted buildings which would last 1000 years²⁶ and as such Speer even had models made of what the buildings would look like after 1000 years.²⁷ The designs for these immense, exaggerated buildings and monuments was intended to show the people what could be achieved under Nazism while at the same time criticizing the liberal architectural forms which developed under the relative freedom of the Weimar Republic. The actions of the Nazi Party in condemning modernist styles and planning to build colossal neo-classical structures clearly portrays a message and reveals one of the vital roles architecture had in the propaganda of the Party.

Architecture played a critical role as propaganda during the Third Reich. The Nazi Party had many aims with their architectural propaganda and while they had clear aims, many of them were never realised due to the outbreak of war. Their aim to create a single, cohesive German community or 'Volksgemeinschaft' was promoted through the 'Blut und Boden' program which had an emphasis on getting back to the Germanic roots of the German Volk by building simpler farm buildings that made Germans feel a connection to their Aryan forefathers. The creation of the Nazi Party Rally grounds along with the construction of various Thingplätze was aimed at increasing the community spirit of the German Volk and encouraging community gatherings. Pride, patriotism and nationalism were all increased by the redesigning of Berlin into the Welthauptstadt Germania. A sense of accomplishment among the people was also intended to come out of this project. This would increase the Volk's self worth and would show them what was possible under Nazism. Finally, the Nazis

²⁵ Taylor, *The Word in Stone*, p.10.

²⁶ Hitler, *Völkischer Beobachter*, 19 July 1937.

²⁷ David Van Tol, *Albert Speer: Historical Personalities of the Twentieth Century* (Brisbane: Farr Books, 2008), p.37.

used architecture as an anti-Bolshevik and anti-expressionist form of propaganda. By banning and sanctioning individualist creations, the Nazi Party were sending a clear message about what they deemed appropriate for the Reich. By designing buildings which were so far removed from modernist, expressionist and individualist nuances they further enforced their ideology. It is fair to say that the Nazis used architecture extensively throughout their regime to both promote their own ideology and to quell opposing ones. It is also clear that architecture was necessary for the promulgation of Nazi ideology. While many of their plans were not realised, the legacy of these plans left an indelible mark on German architecture long after the Nazi Party disappeared.

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