

Solidifying Political Power Through the Built World: The Nazi Party's Utilization of Architecture as a Means of Indoctrination, Empire Building, and Perpetuation of a Forced Labor Economy

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Background + Initial Research Premise

Architecture is not created in a vacuum. It cannot be separated from the society in which it is produced, nor the lives of those who design, build, and later exist around it. It is both a reflection of its surroundings and a propagation of its creator's goals. At its best, it is a means of designing a world geared towards egalitarianism, advancement, and widespread quality of life. At its worst, architecture and the means through which it is constructed can be made to function as a collaborator to truly volatile and cruel regimes. There is perhaps no greater example of the latter than the architectural undertakings and wider building economy of the Nazi Regime. I was first introduced to the concept of a distinctly-Nazi category of architecture in one of my undergraduate courses, and was instantly intrigued at the idea of the built form being manipulated to help achieve such violent and extreme goals. Through additional research I learned of Adolf Hitler's obsession with architecture and belief that dedicating inordinate resources to numerous architectural projects was absolutely vital to the Party's success. To him, architecture was not just about constructing buildings, but reshaping Germany's cities and landscapes to achieve the power he desired for his own empire.

With this introduction, I set out to explore three main questions for my research:

- 1) How did the Nazi party employ and exploit architecture as a method of indoctrination?
- 2) How did these architectural undertakings relate to the Party's long term goals?
- 3) How did the physical architectural works themselves manifest and reflect the ideologies of the Party?

Summer 1: Methodology and Process

To conduct research, I decided my first summer would be spent traveling and my second summer would be spent reading and writing. Since much of my curiosity about Nazi architecture focussed on its coercive powers, I thought it best to see these sites as someone without an extensive background on the topic so that I could experience a more visceral reaction to the works rather than one dictated by prior academic expertise. Furthermore, it seemed ideal to have some in-person experience with these works before dedicating a summer to learning of them through the lens of others. Consequently, during my first summer, I spent three weeks traveling through Berlin, Nuremberg, Munich, Schleiden, and Frankfurt visiting architectural sites, memorials, and museums.

This trip, while immensely valuable in developing a far-reaching foundation of knowledge, made me realize my initial research premise was decidedly too broad. Part of the reason I find examining a society through its architecture fascinating is because architecture inherently permeates every aspect of a society. Architecture is not limited to palaces or state buildings, but rather extends to every built form. Thus, I decided that two six-week research periods were insufficient to develop a comprehensive understanding of any society's entire

architectural portfolio. Moreover, I feared that by not limiting my scope I ran the risk of coming to a non-specific conclusion, which would struggle to assert anything of real or specific importance. I therefore decided to limit my research both in typology and time frame, continuing with my initial research questions but constraining myself to public projects during the pre-war and early-war years. Furthermore, I chose to focus on the wider functions of architecture as a whole rather than on specific works. With this refined scope, I spent the last two weeks of my first summer reading on Nazi architecture mainly from the perspective of art and architectural historians. Through these works I began to understand Nazi architecture as a means of public indoctrination and empire building, and my research became largely consumed with these two functions.

Summer 2: Methodology, Process, and Shift in Research

With the travel portion of my research completed, my second summer was dedicated entirely to developing my final thesis and reading. I focussed largely on works by art and architectural historians, as many historians of the Holocaust and WWII do not address architecture. While I did not find this gap in publications by Holocaust and WWII historians surprising, I did find it affirmed my initial preference to study architecture. Much of the reason I had chosen to study an architecture-related topic is precisely because it is so often ignored as a consequential field in the wider scholarship of a society. For the study of the Holocaust and WWII, this is particularly understandable – in a subject so marked by the atrocity of genocide and the wider violence of World War II, dedicating considerable effort to the study of buildings and their construction hardly seems crucial. And yet, Nazi architecture and the Reich’s building economy comprise a fundamental position in the Regime, not only as a domain in and of itself, but as a reflection of the Party’s wider goals and the means through which they intended to achieve them. As I continued my reading, the two goals I had honed in on the previous summer – architecture as a means of public indoctrination and empire building – were consistently reinforced.

However, it was not until I expanded my reading beyond these two “goals” that I realized I had missed an entire third category: architecture as a means of creating and propagating the Reich’s forced labor economy. Namely through Paul B. Jaskot’s *The Architecture of Oppression*, I came to learn that I committed the very error I set out to avoid. By initially focusing on scholarship almost entirely by art and architectural historians, I unintentionally limited myself to aesthetic observations and public goals relating to Nazi architecture. Just as Holocaust and WWII historians seldom focus on the art, architecture, and urbanism of the Third Reich, I too had excluded a relevant goal of the Reich’s building economy from my research solely because it wasn’t addressed by the academic material I had chosen. The two-pronged approach I once believed sufficient became three-pronged – my research into the relationship between Nazi

architecture and forced labor in the Reich did not contradict prior conclusions I arrived at about public indoctrination and empire building, but rather added an additional dimension to them. Accordingly, the rest of my second summer continued with the same method of research as before, except with this added focus.

Finalized Premise and Narrowed Scope

With this new knowledge and my research done, I officially updated my premise to include one question instead of the initial three: **What roles did architecture play in the rise of the Third Reich?** Using this question, I categorized my research into the aforementioned categories:

- 1) Indoctrination
- 2) Empire Building
- 3) Perpetuating the Reich's Forced Labor Economy

Abstract

In his infamous *Mein Kampf*, peppered throughout a wider manifesto characterized by violent antisemitism, tenets of strict racial hierarchy, and ideas of how Germany could be freed from the “degeneracy” that had befallen it, Adolf Hitler periodically touts a surprising passion of his: architecture. “I would be an architect. Obstacles are placed across our path in life, not to be boggled at but to be surmounted. And I was fully determined to surmount these obstacles,” he writes, espousing architecture as “queen of the arts” and an honorable means of serving one’s nation.¹ Hitler indeed understood architecture through an aesthetic perspective, though, more importantly, he understood it as a reflection of its surrounding society. A nation, no matter the extent of its military or economic prowess, could not achieve true greatness without a corresponding built world to reflect it.

Obviously, Hitler never became an architect in the traditional sense. And yet, his obsession with architecture profoundly impacted the Nazi Party’s rise. Hitler dedicated immense time and resources to the Reich’s architecture and building economy, and, in doing so, was able to intentionally employ this transformation of the built world to achieve his political aims on three unique levels. Firstly, by advancing his warped views on classic Greek and Roman antiquity and their connections to the German people, Hitler designed public works strongly influenced by classicism to enforce the idea that the German people were fundamentally connected to each other in a shared identity of greatness – much in the same way he believed societies of antiquity were. Ergo, by emulating architectural styles and techniques of antiquity, these vast public programs, with their particular focus on public spaces and Party centers, were fashioned and designed to serve as sites of indoctrination to this united view. These spaces proclaimed and solidified the Reich’s overarching power while making objection to the Party increasingly difficult. Secondly, by undertaking such vast civic works, Hitler was able to preemptively create the basis of what would become his empire. He believed that, through architecture, he could force the world to see the Reich as a global empire, creating works incorporated with what he called “ruin value” to serve as physical reminders of his greatness for centuries onward. Lastly, the execution of these projects created one of the first impetuses for forced labor camps. Years before the “Final Solution” formalized in the early 1940s, mass building programs offered a rationale for establishing and maintaining some of the earliest forced labor camps, using them to produce the materials necessary for these works while keeping an entire population of supposed enemies of the state hidden, disempowered, and brutalized. Taken together, these three functions of architecture, though at times disparate in strategy and scope, each aided in the rise of the Nazi Party.

¹ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. James Murphy (White Wolf Publishing, 2014), 20, 25.

Hitler's Ideas of Antiquity and Their Relation to the German People

In order to understand Hitler's architectural motivations, it is first critical to understand his perception of ancient Greek and Roman society. Partially due to the Euro-centric manner of his artistic education, much of Hitler's world view was centered around his interests in antiquity and his notion that these societies' genetic superiority led to their greatness. He considered the ancient Greeks the racial ancestors of Germans, stating that "when people inquire about our ancestors, we must always point to the 'ancient' Greeks."² This conviction, combined with the belief that Greek beauty is "immortal" because of the "connection between physical beauty, shining spirit and noble soul," convinced him that this Greek model was the ideal blueprint for the *Volksgemeinschaft*.³

Where the Greeks persuaded Hitler with their racial "purity" and genetic relationship, the Romans did so through their empire building and monumentality.⁴ Hitler viewed Roman societies through a social-Darwinist lens, attributing their imperial might to their widespread genetic superiority and ability to unite as a singular people – qualities he foresaw for his own empire.⁵ Significantly, Hitler noted how the Romans viewed architecture and the rebuilding of the world as "a manifestation of the authority of the empire," and thus considered the architecture of his own empire as crucial to his success.⁶ By connecting the German people to the two societies Hitler considered most pure – the Greeks through ancestry and the Romans through conquering and building ability – he was able not only to justify, but legitimize, his own view that the German people were destined to emulate these great empires.

Hitler's Creation of a Uniquely Nazi Architecture

In conjunction with the goal of Nazism to "cleanse" the German race of all degeneracy, Hitler and his architects strove to design in a style that would have this cleansing effect on the German landscape.⁷ Just as the classicism of antiquity had reigned culturally supreme during its

² Alexander Scobie, *Hitler's State Architecture: the Impact of Classical Antiquity* (University Park (Pa.), PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990), 13.

³ *Volksgemeinschaft* refers to the German phrase meaning "people's community." The term became popular during WWI and was later used by the Nazi Party to refer to a united German people unanimously dedicated to the empire.

Jan Nelis, "Modernist Neo- Classicism and Antiquity in the Political Religion of Nazism: Adolf Hitler As Poietes of the Third Reich," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 9, no. 4 (December 2008): pp. 475-490. Anne Bordeleau, Donald McKay, and Robert Jan van Pelt, *The Evidence Room* (Toronto, Ontario: New Jewish Press, 2016), 480.

⁴ Robert R. Taylor, *The Word in Stone: The Role of Architecture in National Socialist Ideology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1974), 39.

⁵ Frederic Spotts, *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics* (London, UK: Hutchinson, 2002), 21.

⁶ Scobie, 39.

⁷ Taylor, 220.

time, Hitler desired to create an architectural style that would incorporate the ideals of Nazim in every built form and establish Germany as the international cultural model. As such, he developed a form of neoclassicism inspired by aspects of Greek and Roman models he believed would solidify the Reich as a global empire – that is, he removed most elements relating to the ideology of classical humanism and left the elements he thought best represented the grandeur he wished to achieve. This style incorporated many classical elements, such as raised platforms, heavy use of stone (especially granite), and minimalist facades, but was mostly motivated by what could be called Hitler’s “passion for the colossal” in that his main takeaway from classical architecture was that sheer size surpassed all other architectural features.⁸ Noting how the Romans were known for civic works considered enormous for their time, Hitler resolved to have the widest streets, biggest stadiums, most impressive airports, and grandest state buildings. Furthermore, as societies of antiquity prioritized the development of civic centers and state architecture over private works, he too became determined to redesign German cities such that the state was central to the city plan and valued over everything else.

What is less important is precisely how Hitler designed in a neoclassical style, or what specific works were created; simply comparing these designs to classical architecture makes these connections evident:

“The formal sources of inspiration were obvious: vast Roman buildings such as the Pantheon and Coliseum (discernible in the Grosse Halle in Berlin and the Kongresshalle in Nuremberg), the Pergamon altar (notably in the main stand on the Zeppelinfeld) and the Parthenon (which is alluded to in the Haus der Deutsche Kunst in Munich), whereas the main cities were to be reshaped according to the Roman ground plan.”⁹

What is far more important is what Hitler believed creating vast architectural programs and designing in a neoclassical style would achieve. The Nazi regime believed that architecture, moreso than any other art form, had hugely influential and psychologically symbolic value. By creating a form of architecture inspired by the styles of racially “pure” empires, and, by extension, reflecting the Party’s goals themselves, the Regime could “exhibit, produce, and reproduce itself, conveying a message of force, cultural homogeneity, and ethnic purity” which would in turn transform the German *Volk* into a people possessing and espousing these qualities.¹⁰ Architecture was no apolitical endeavor – it was a way to indoctrinate the German population

⁸ Spotts, 329.

Brian Ladd, *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 129.

⁹ Nelis, 480.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 479.

Spotts, 329.

to the Party's side, establish the Reich as the empire it aspired to be, and begin to rid itself of the "impure" population standing in the way of its success.

Architecture as a Means of Indoctrination

Perhaps the most notable function of architecture in the Reich's rise is in its ability to be used as a force of indoctrination. Through his understanding that "psychological manipulation [could] be more potent than reasoned argument or concrete programmes," Hitler centered the design of his works around his own glorification with the intention to manipulate the *Volk* into following the tenets of the Party.¹¹

Size and typology of architecture was an important factor in convincing the German people of the Party's strength. Just as Roman and Greek state architecture is often characterized by gathering places and community centers, Hitler focused on creating amphitheaters, stadiums, and rallying grounds at a size which would overwhelm its citizens, "dominate all private buildings," and ultimately convince them of the Reich's political power.¹² Hitler was under the perception that the Greeks and Romans had a sense of shared identity which was crucial to develop in his own people, and that creating mass gathering spaces controlled by the Party (instead of, say, through a religious institute), would push his people to unite politically and bond in "a feeling of belonging together."¹³ Connected to the idea of the Roman amphitheater, Hitler believed that by enclosing thousands of his people in the same building or grounds, they would be more easily molded into his perfect image of the *Volksgemeinschaft*.¹⁴

Marshalling this sense of singular community – in this context, a community in which individuality was actively discouraged – was absolutely critical to the Party's expansionist goals. The colossal dimensions of these gathering places intentionally served to make the individual feel insignificant among the vast crowd. In doing so, Hitler hoped to convince individuals that serving the Reich over oneself was a "higher mission" and to establish that "selfless heroism in the interests of the *Volk* was to be the encouraged norm" once war broke out.¹⁵ In short, these large rally grounds indoctrinated individuals into believing they were worthless when alone but

¹¹ Spotts, 8.

¹² Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, trans. Richard Winston and Clara Winston (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1970), 134-135.

Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, *Art Under a Dictatorship* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1954), 59, 108.

¹³ Jochen Thies, *Hitler's Plans for Global Domination: Nazi Architecture & Ultimate War Aims* (Berghahn Books, 2014), 80.

¹⁴ We see examples of this type of architecture in sites such as the Kongresshalle in Nuremberg or the Olympiastadion in Berlin.

Taylor, 164.

Scobie, 19.

¹⁵ Scobie, 40.

Taylor, 33.

powerful when united in service of the Reich. The setup of these rally grounds and communal spaces also proved hugely successful in quelling anti-Party tendencies. By encouraging such homogeneity among the *Volk*, there was the implicit implication that anyone not fitting into this mold was inherently an enemy of the Reich and, as such, should be shunned by society.¹⁶

Architecture as a Means of Empire Building

While relatively few works of Nazi architecture were built in their entirety, Hitler and his team's master plans for Germany show the true extent to which the Party aimed for their empire's total architectural revitalization. Over fifty German cities were to be "extensively rebuilt," with the most drastic transformations planned for five "Führer cities": Linz, Munich, Hamburg, Nuremberg, and, most consequentially, Berlin.¹⁷ Significantly, these cities were not considered in isolation, but as connected pieces of an empire-wide network, every part of which was designed to deliberately glorify Nazism's image:

"Every building they planned or constructed was also part of a master plan for the rebuilding of the entire city in which it stood. But that was not enough. Every city was to be fitted into a gigantic pattern, a project that envisaged the complete remodeling of the whole of Germany in the Nazi image. Every house, every bridge, every tree was destined to become a monument to the power, glory, and beauty of the Third Reich."¹⁸

This approach to architecture and urban planning was heavily inspired by the Roman models Hitler so admired. By designing an empire where every aspect of the physical – and thus, the tangible – world reflected the glory of his Party, Hitler knew that his power would be much more difficult to revoke. Though not modeled perfectly after Roman cities and roads, he believed that, by emulating the general physical features of the Roman empire, he too could attain the power and authority of the Romans.¹⁹

Hitler's focus on the power of the physical was not only a means of solidifying his power during his lifetime, but to memorialize him and his party for thousands of years to come. He himself expressed the importance of creating a vast portfolio of state architecture in the following way:

"Even if people should forget the accomplishments of our armies, the buildings, which will be erected in Berlin, will, even after a thousand years, as they do now,

¹⁶ Scobie, 72.

¹⁷ Thies, 99.

¹⁸ Lehmann-Haupt, 106.

¹⁹ Scobie, 5.

speak of their glory: the triumphal arches, the Soldier Hall, ... the Hall of the People!”²⁰

Here is perhaps where Hitler’s obsession with Roman architecture is most apparent. Just as numerous remains of Roman architecture and infrastructure exist today, nearly two millennia after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, Hitler desperately wanted to create a physical landscape that could not ever be taken away or entirely destroyed, even if his Party ever fell from power. There was a value in the survival of “noble ruins,” and Hitler was so determined to create works that would produce such “ruin value” that he intentionally designed in a way which took account of how a site would look after centuries of decay.²¹ All together, Hitler acknowledged that, in a way, it did not matter if a thousand years after his death memories of his Reich had faded. So long as a tangible form of his rule survived via the built world, his empire could never truly die.

Architecture as a Means of Perpetuating the Reich’s Forced Labor Economy

The most sinister role of architecture in the Reich’s rise was not related to its ability to help convert citizens or symbolize monumentality, but in the deep connection between the Party’s building programs – or, more specifically, the manner through which they were to be executed – and the development of many of the Reich’s first forced labor camps. The initial “need” for forced labor came from a simple lack of a labor force sufficient to execute the Reich’s vast architectural plans. Since the majority of Reich laborers were employed in various armament industries by the late 1930s, Hitler and his constituents acknowledged early on that without this labor force, their planned projects were dead on arrival.²² This is where the creation of a massive forced labor population comes in. Through most of the 1930s, with the notable exception of Dachau, the Reich’s SS-run concentration camps were “nothing more than warehouses acquired for the purpose of having detention centers” and were rarely, if ever, used for systematic work.²³ Beginning in 1936, using Dachau as a model, the Reich began organizing the framework to establish camps which could be used for labor, ultimately “[linking] state architectural policy to the political function of incarcerating and punishing” supposed enemies of the state.²⁴

²⁰ The Soldier Hall was a projected hall in Berlin and the Hall of the People most likely refers to the planned Grosse Hall.

Nelis, 482.

²¹ Ibid., 482-483.

²² Scobie, 129.

²³ Paul B. Jaskot, *The Architecture of Oppression: The SS, Forced Labor, and the Nazi Monumental Building Economy* (London, UK: Routledge, 2000), 13-14.

²⁴ Ibid., 1.

Through the next few years, as “the avalanche of city renovation directives began,” the role of camps solely as prisons rapidly changed for these economic reasons.²⁵ Camps such as Mauthausen, Flossenbürg, Neuengamme, Natzweiler, and Gross-Rosen were intentionally set up near natural stone deposits, old quarries, and large brick factories so that inmates could cheaply produce the materials for these architectural projects.²⁶ Here, the purpose of working in stone is two-fold. Stone was not only crucial for emulating classical architecture – by working in stone Hitler could continue these projects (and, by extension, the camps required for them) well into the war, as armement efforts had no need for stone as they did materials such as metal. This separation between the needs of the building economy and armement efforts made these building efforts viable well into the war years, with the primary purpose of forced labor camps being to provide materials for the building economy from the late 1930s until 1942-1943.²⁷ As the war went on, the forced labor population was to increase as more “enemies of the state” were rounded up and territories were conquered. The “armies of slaves” taken throughout the war were to make up the labor force to continue these projects decades onward, including plans to keep a population of between three to five million prisoners for twenty years after the war in order to execute these architectural projects.²⁸

All of this demonstrates the extensive and premeditated connection between the Nazi’s architectural aims and their goals of systematically eliminating perceived enemy populations. While the monumental state architecture of the Regime was indeed about “asserting ideological goals,” these programs were also about creating the systemic framework which would rid the Reich of those it deemed beneath it.²⁹ Architecture was not merely an endeavor which coincidentally resulted in the expansion of the Reich’s forced labor economy, but a field of development actively and intentionally utilized to uphold and perpetuate the violence of the Regime.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the Nazis used architecture to achieve the Reich’s rise. The mechanisms considered and analyzed above – indoctrination, empire building, and forced labor – are at the heart of their efforts. While each of the three is different in their content and implications, they significantly do not contradict each other; rather they form a cohesive plan with mindful intentions. Architecture’s role in indoctrination does not negate its role as a means of empire building, nor do either of these roles refute the building programs’ connections to the establishment of a forced labor economy. Instead, these roles each work in conjunction with each

²⁵ Thies, 101.

²⁶ Scobie, 130.

²⁷ Jaskot, 11.

²⁸ Thies, 101.

²⁹ Jaskot, 116.

other, demonstrating the far-reaching and multifaceted ways in which architecture and the built world were utilized to bolster the image of the Nazi Party and aid in its rise. This is not at all to imply that architecture was the most consequential tool in the Reich's rise; however, to omit its role in its entirety is to ignore a significant social and political factor in Nazi history. Given the numerous fields of knowledge and labor required to create a built work – the architect themselves, their team, engineers, government and municipal support, laborers, and building material manufacturers and producers – it is nearly impossible to create apolitical architecture. The very extent to which the Nazi Regime took advantage of architecture's power and ability to be politicized exemplifies the degree to which architecture and the built world can be manipulated to serve the most extreme ideological ends.

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