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# **ARCHITECTURE IN BERLIN 1933–1945**

**A Guide Through Nazi Berlin**

**Lukas Verlag**

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Zeppelin floating above the Reich Sports Field, drawing by Hans Liska, 1936

## Introduction

The Olympic Games in Berlin on August 1, 1936. Guests and athletes from all over the world come to visit the capital of the German Reich, which has been fabulously decked out for the occasion. Unter den Linden and the east-west axis that runs from the city center to the newly constructed Reich Sports Field are decorated with flags, pylons and dishes filled with burning flames. The world's largest and most modern sports arena is dedicated with great fanfare. Athletes from forty-nine nations welcome the Führer and Reich Chancellor Adolf Hitler. The German people have achieved equality; they have regained their lost honor – this is what the ecstatic visitors and their hosts are thinking. During the opening ceremony in the Olympic stadium it becomes clear just where this enthusiasm is heading. The festival pageant “Olympic Youth” culminates in the fourth act with the “heroic struggle and lamentation of the dead” calling for sacrificial death.

May 8, 1945. The capitulation of the German Wehrmacht is sealed in Berlin-Karlshorst. The city with four million inhabitants is no more than a heap of rubble. The 207 bomb attacks that began in 1940 ravaged entire neighborhoods and wiped out a large part of the downtown area. More than a third of the residential apartments are severely damaged or entirely destroyed. The dreams of a future “Germania” world capital have dissolved into thin air.

The rise and fall of the Nazi dictatorship are marked by the Olympic Games, which Nazi Germany had hoped would bring it worldwide recognition, and the unconditional surrender that ended World War II. The Reich Sports Field and the Officers’ Casino, where the capitulation was signed, still exist today. Both sites were built by the National Socialist regime and are an example of Third Reich architecture. They reflect the desire to give the German capital a new face.

Architecture in the Third Reich was used to express power and authority. This is particularly evident in Berlin’s city center. The monumental new buildings erected in the Reich capital were supposed to symbolize Germany’s international standing. In 1936 Adolf Hitler said that he wanted to see “eternal works” built in Berlin, “comparable only to Ancient Egypt, Babylon and Rome”. At the Reich Party Congress in 1937 Hitler proclaimed: “The minor daily needs have changed over thousands of years and will continue to evolve, but the major cultural documents of humanity made of granite and marble have stood for millennia. And these are the only true stationary poles in the flood of all other manifestations. In times of decay, humanity has continued to return to them in search of eternal magical power and it has always found it there as a means to gain control of its confusion and establish a new order



Pioneer School I, Officers’ Casino, 1994. This is where the capitulation of the German Wehrmacht was sealed in 1945.



from the chaos. This is why our buildings should not be built for the year 1940 and not for the year 2000, but like the cathedrals of our past they shall reach into the millennia of the future.”

With these words Hitler was referring largely to the major projects, valued for their propagandistic function. They were to serve the self-presentation of the regime. There was also, however, a great need for new practical buildings, whose major purpose was to function: office buildings, company headquarters, traffic installations, factories and – not to be overlooked – residential complexes and settlements. These building tasks were mostly realized in the outer districts of Berlin. The number of buildings erected during the twelve years of National Socialist

rule from 1933 to 1945 was surprisingly high when one considers that the outbreak of war allowed only six years for construction. In November 1939, because of the war, a ban was declared on new building construction. Half a year later it was followed by the call for the discontinuation of all building measures not crucial to the war effort.

Shortly after their seizure of power, the Nazis began to construct buildings that were to be effective as propaganda. These included the Reich Aviation Ministry, the Tempelhof Airport that was to be expanded into a “world airport”, and the Reich Sports Field that was to be enlarged and redesigned for the Olympic Games. The presentation to the public of these powerful buildings was accompanied by a



North-south axis with the South Station and Triumphal Arch, around 1939



great publicity campaign. The announcements were meant to convey the impression that “all Berlin was a large construction site of the Führer”, despite the fact that in the beginning most building plans focused on individual projects.

At the Reich Party Congress in Nuremberg in 1936 Hitler announced that Berlin would be “rebuilt into the capital of the German Reich”. Initially Hitler had intended to have the Berlin city administration work on his plans for a new order. When he sensed reluctance on the part of the local administration to implement his extensive redesign fantasies he gave the responsibility for planning and building to someone else. On January 30, 1937 the young architect Albert Speer was appointed General Inspector for the Redesign of the Capital (General Building Inspector) and made accountable to the “Führer” directly. The “Law for the Redesign of German Cities”, passed on October 4, 1937, formed the legal basis for executing the extensive plans. The General Building Inspector, with the status of a minister, had the task of coordinating the construction of the monumental buildings, overseeing the planning or doing it himself, and establishing a suitable infrastructure. The “Plan for the Area of Special Interest”, presented in 1938, determined

which areas could not be developed without the approval of the General Building Inspector. It applied to more than half the city area thus depriving the city administration of most of its authority. Speer, who had proven himself an excellent organizer, was appointed Minister for Armament and Munitions in 1942. “Speer’s Building Staff”, formed from “Organization Todt” that had been established by the now deceased Armaments Minister Fritz Todt to address special building tasks, became responsible during World War II for the construction of bunkers, foreign workers camps and armaments factories.

Albert Speer designed the most ambitious city plans to have ever been presented in Berlin’s history. Hitler said it was his own idea to have a monumental axis intersection established in the city. The basic concept, however, had clearly come from Martin Mächler, who had already completed a planning study on the north-south axis in 1917. In 1937 Albert Speer and his staff, familiar with these concepts, designed the broad north-south axis with a major axis intersection at the Brandenburg Gate. The monumental avenue was to begin in Schöneberg, where the new south station was to be built. A 117 meter (384 feet) high triumphal arch was planned for the point where the axis from Tempelhof Airport met



North-south axis, marching grounds, Great Hall, water basin and North Station, around 1939



East-west axis with gate houses and Victory Column, 1939

the north-west axis. Both this structure, dedicated to “the invincible army of the world war”, and the dome hall that was to form the northern end of the axis, were designed on a massive scale. The “Great Hall of the People” was to be the world’s largest assembly hall and able to contain 150,000 to 180,000 spectators beneath a 290 meter (951 feet) high concrete dome. With its sheer bulk of mass it would have dwarfed the neighboring Reichstag building. In light of these dimensions, monumentality degenerated into an enormity of unprecedented scale.

An endless row of large buildings along the north-south axis was planned to house state institutions, ministries, businesses, administrative offices and cultural centers. They would have included the “Palace of the Führer”, the Reich Marshal Office, the main headquarters of AEG company and the administration complex of the Army High Command. A large water basin was to be set behind the dome hall. The north station was to be flanked by the new city hall building, the Marines High Command and the police headquarters.

The establishment of the north-south axis required a ruthless demolition of wide areas of the city. The old sections, the Alsen and Tiergarten district, were almost completely destroyed. Construction began on the House of Tourism before the war broke out. The building was to lie on the “Round Plaza”. The planned circular plaza grounds would have connected the north-south axis and the diagonally intersecting Potsdamer Strasse. Since the embassies located in the planning area were to be torn down, a new Diplomats’ Quarter was to be established

north of the Landwehrkanal. Seven new embassy buildings were erected there by 1938.

Albert Speer was able to develop the east-west axis from an already existing street axis. The Charlottenburger Chaussee (today’s Strasse des 17. Juni), which ran through the Tiergarten, and Bismarckstrasse were both widened and uniformly designed. The Victory Column, which had been moved from Königsplatz (today’s Platz der Republik) to the Grosse Stern and enlarged, formed the visual centerpiece of the avenue axis. The seven kilometer (4.3 miles) long stretch from the Brandenburg Gate to Adolf-Hitler-Platz (today’s Theodor-Heuss-Platz) was completed on time and dedicated on Hitler’s birthday in April 1939. The ten-lane avenue was lined with candelabras. The lanterns, providing dramatic lighting, and the gate houses on Grosse Stern helped to transform the east-west axis into a “via triumphalis” that extended the street axis of Unter den Linden, the Prussian “via triumphalis”. The Grosse Stern and Victory Column, along with other repositioned monuments, formed the “Forum of the Second Reich”, which was to recall the earlier German empire.

On June 25, 1940, following the successful battles against Poland and France, Hitler ordered building construction to resume immediately. “Through a new structural design, Berlin must quickly convey the image of a capital of a strong new Reich to express the greatness attained by our victories. By realizing what has by now become the most important building task of the Reich I see the most significant contribution to definitively assuring our