Jürgen Petersen, “Albert Speer – a German Master Builder” (1942)

Abstract

The leading architect of the National Socialist regime, Albert Speer (1905–1981) rose to become the Reich Minister of Armaments and War Production in 1942. Before the war, Speer’s skills as an architect led to his being tasked with several large-scale building projects, including the Zeppelin Field Stadium in Nuremburg for Nazi party rallies, as well as a new Reich Chancellery building. Speer’s largest project by far was the complete rebuilding of Berlin, a project that was to see Berlin reimagined on a grand scale as “Germania,” from wide boulevards, massive buildings—such as plans for the “People’s Hall” [Volkshalle], an enormous domed structure in the center of this newly envisioned capital. These construction projects ground to a halt after the onset of war.

Speer’s rise to power—and fame—resulted in part from the Nazis’ conviction that architecture represented the ideal art form for their movement and for the “new world” they sought to create. In this piece, journalist Jürgen Petersen puts architecture into a longer history of artistic movements and eras, calling the twentieth century the age of architecture.

Source

There is a theory about the succession of the arts. According to this theory, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were the great age of painting, the eighteenth belonged to literature and journalism, while the Romantics were primarily musicians. Surely, like all historical demarcations this is not entirely accurate. Many things flourish at the same time side by side, the fields blend one into the other. But after the creative drought of the late nineteenth century in architecture and the tentative and often errant attempts at the beginning of the twentieth century, there are many indications that the present stands at the beginning of an architectural age.

Seeming coincidences are becoming fateful necessities. One is that the man who created the National Socialist Reich has a background in architecture. For the present, this establishes the kind of unity of politics and architecture that was otherwise alive only in the Renaissance and Antiquity. The will and the force of National Socialist building are the expression of its political faith and a claim to rule. “Our buildings are created to strengthen this authority,” it says in the Führer’s 1937 speech on culture. Here architecture for its own sake remains meaningless. It derives its true justification from life. It is the life of the nation which simultaneously also moves art. There is no separation between these two spheres. German architecture wants to show the face of the struggle. It wants to make a statement about those tough decisions with which political existence is continuously confronted. In the buildings, the word of the Führer is complemented as the “word of stone.” Some have spoken about “built National Socialism,” a phrase that seeks to express that contemporary German architecture is not about technical questions or aesthetic values, but about a political way of life that speaks from the buildings.

Even the last generation still considered it self-evident that politics and art were separated by chasms. The connection between the two spheres in National Socialist structures is as close as is possible. It is this (and not any kind of stylistic imitation) that establishes the closeness to the architecture of the Renaissance and Antiquity, or to the Romanesque style, say. These are the real political eras of European architecture. They incorporate simultaneously both severity and richness. In them lives the spiritual nobility of the Age of Pericles, the powerful oriental nobility of the Ottoman Empire, the profligate sense

of space of the Medici, masculine styles, that is—whereas Gothic, Baroque, or Biedermeier are characterized in this sense as “feminine” styles. One does not understand the face of the new buildings in Germany without this profoundly masculine expression of its nature. In what they express, they are not for a moment detached from the political and spiritual foundations of the present. Origin and intention are nowhere coincidental. Everything has a reason.

Source: Jürgen Petersen, “Albert Speer – Ueber einen deutschen Baumeister,” *Das Reich*, January 11, 1942; reprinted in Joseph Wulf, ed., *Die Bildenden Künste im Dritten Reich. Eine Dokumentation.* Gütersloh: Sigbert Mohn, 1963, pp. 228–29.

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