

**Authoritarian Themes of National Socialist Architecture in Berlin**

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## **Introduction**

During the time of National Socialism (commonly referred to as NS in Germany), the NSDAP has sought to cement its power of the 'Thousand Year Reich' through architecture and urban planning as part of its propaganda machine. Since it is a broad topic, this paper will focus only on three of the most notable examples of NS architecture that still stands in modern-day Berlin. The Tempelhof Airport, Fehrbelliner Platz's public buildings, and the Olympiastadion in Berlin will be the subjects of focus in this paper.

To further narrow down the scope of the paper to lead to any useful conclusion, this paper adopts a very specific definition on the word 'authoritarian', 'authority', and 'power' in the context of NS. Authoritarianism in favors subjects' blind and complete obedience to the state's or party's stance allowing little to no personal freedom to act. Authority is the legal right to control opinion or behavior of people in a country. Power is the ability to direct social or political control over people by the government of a sovereign state.<sup>1</sup>

In terms of specific architectural traits, this paper explores how classical and neo-classical designs are used as a form of propaganda to project power and authority.

### **Neoclassical Themes of NS Architecture**

Classical forms of architecture usually reference Greek and Roman art of classical antiquity. 'Classical' and 'neoclassical' are often used interchangeably to describe architecture though neo-classical is more applicable in this paper because it specifically refers to the revival of the styles of classical antiquity. Neoclassical styles often focus on a measured proportion and become impersonal due to the mathematical nature of the design. Buildings are treated as sculptures and usually built for optimum visual pleasure as well.<sup>2</sup>

Albert Speer, arguably the most favored architect of Adolf Hitler, adopted neoclassical designs in his buildings whenever he could. Speer was so successful he became the general building inspector for Berlin and was involved in many designs for the buildings of Hitler's 'Welthauptstadt' of which the Tempelhof Airport, Fehrbelliner Platz, and Olympiastadion (mainly designed by Werner March) were a part.<sup>2</sup> This resulted in extensive use of neoclassical designs in NS buildings in Berlin.

Neoclassical designs sprung up as a reaction to the excess and over-decoration of Rococo and Baroque styles that some thought made buildings look busy and without focus. Neoclassical buildings are typically constructed on a grand scale with simple geometric shapes. It often includes the use of freestanding columns, blank walls, and simple decorations to give a clean and uncluttered appearance.<sup>3</sup> Even the gardens and open spaces surrounding the building were often built to conform to these standards.<sup>4</sup>

Since neoclassicism is based on Greco-Roman history, it is important to note down a few key features of Roman cities that have similarities with NS buildings. Roman cities typically consist of a coliseum (reflected in the Kongresshalle in Nuremberg), an amphitheater (reflected in the Waldbühne), forums (reflected in Gauforums), and arches in aqueduct and bridges (reflected in Autobahn bridges) to provide public as well as monumental space.<sup>5</sup>

## **Tempelhof Airport**

Although the Tempelhof Airport has existed before the NSDAP rose to power, its main construction took place between 1936 and 1941. Due to the outbreak of WWII the entire complex was never completed, nonetheless, enough of the structures have been completed to resemble the original plans and give clues as to the original designs.<sup>6</sup>

As airports are important buildings contributing to the first impressions of a city Tempelhof was upsized. What is now the Platz der Luftbrücke was originally designed to be a large circular plaza surrounded by curved buildings forming four fifths of the circle. The remaining fifth of the circle was to be marked by two great obelisks as the entrance to the airport from a wide avenue.<sup>6</sup> The use of simple geometric shapes and proportions in this plaza on a grand scale conforms to the principles of neoclassical designs. In fact, when seen from the sky the airport buildings were supposed to form the shape of an eagle, but the laurel that the eagle held was never completed on the plaza.<sup>35</sup>

Incorporating the Reichsadler into every aspect of the building is symbolic of the power that Hitler aspires to have. In an intentional link with Greek mythology, the Reichsadler of the Third Reich was inspired from the Aetos Dios, king of the birds and guardian of Zeus' sceptre.<sup>35</sup> Effective due to the angle of approach of airplanes, passengers are able to see the symbolism clearly upon landing. It is a symbol commonly used to attribute Zeus as the god of gods. Apostoles said that when the birds were divided and the gods had to choose between them, Zeus chose the eagle. The eagle is also prevalent in other traditional tales of classical antiquity and connected to Zeus, such as the time when an eagle brought food to baby Zeus or when Zeus once arrived at Naxos in the form of an eagle.<sup>14</sup>

The use of the eagle motif across all areas in the airport from the stone reliefs plastered all over the wall to the eagles on the gate and forming the shape of the airport are all designed to assert Aryan superiority on visitors. When the eagle of Zeus is used to openly represent a people through architecture, this is a clear propaganda message.

The exterior of the office buildings facing into the plaza all have Reichsadlers (although the Hakenkreuz are now removed) and the main terminal building had a large eagle grasping a globe. The same Reichsadler with a globe (but not a Hakenkreuz) was planned for the Volkshalle that was never built.<sup>8</sup> These motifs of pomp and grandeur are not unlike ancient Greek streets that were lined with statues of gods and goddesses on both sides. The Tempelhof Airport symbolized the aspired German influence over the world and directed the masses' attention to the Third Reich's architectural 'victory'.<sup>7</sup>

Much like the plaza, the main terminal building of the airport is also shaped in a semi-circle. This is a curious design for an airport as a concave terminal building would minimize instead of maximize the usable surface area to load and unload passengers. However, being almost an architect himself, Hitler emphasizes form over function.<sup>7</sup> What is little known is that the future plans of the airport include putting stadium-like stands over the flat roof of the airport so

the masses could watch future NS air shows. If they were to be completed, the concave-shaped building with seating on top would have functioned like a Roman amphitheater, at over a kilometer in length.<sup>6</sup>

The design of the building functions so well that it was used for the soap opera 'Das Adlon. Eine Familiensaga' showing that Speer has achieved his preferred neoclassical design. Being used as part of the set for 'The Hunger Games', a movie including a regime not unlike NS, further shows that the airport is still considered an effective propaganda machine.<sup>6</sup>

Underground, the airport has a vast array of facilities for military applications. Having underground areas is a major feature in many ancient Roman civilizations as Italian volcanic rock was strong yet soft enough to carve through, roman baths, churches, stadiums, and theatres all had underground structures.<sup>9</sup> The underground sections of the Tempelhof airport are used for the storage of film from espionage activities as well as an air raid bunker. The air raid bunker even has comical uplifting cartoons drawn on the walls as with most other NS-era bunkers to act as encouraging propaganda during dire times.<sup>31,32</sup>

From the grand entrance and appearance of the airport to the details in the underground bunker and extensive application of Greek mythology, everything was conceived through the lens of neoclassicism. Even the aspired future additions that never came to existence show how the neoclassical-styled amphitheater was aimed to propagate NS power and greatness.

### **Fehrbelliner Platz**

Consisting of a mix of public and private offices, Fehrbelliner Platz was constructed during NS power in a neoclassical style. Construction began on the public buildings in 1937 and the private companies soon followed in style to express their loyalty to the party.<sup>15,16</sup> Exiting from the U-Bahn station with the same name, citizens are faced with a wall of large granite buildings. Just like Tempelhof airport, the plaza is arranged in a circular manner and radiates out in a circle until Mansfelder Straße.<sup>18</sup>

The semicircular shape of the plaza not only resembles the Greek amphitheatre, but also functions as a Roman-style forum. The forum was used in ancient Roman cities as places to congregate people and as a place of meeting. The presence of large government buildings in such a place intended for public enjoyment shows how the NS government intended to exert their authority over the everyday lives of the people.<sup>11</sup>

The buildings' front façades that form the semicircular shape of the plaza display Hitler's aim to present Germany with 'Macht und Gewalt'. The carved limestone reliefs on the entrances of the government buildings resemble the kind of monuments in Rome used to commemorate victories, except here it is used to commemorate the concerted efforts of the German people. Most of the limestone reliefs contain semi-nude men in traditional Greek athletic form glorifying even the most menial tasks such as construction and logistics.<sup>12</sup>

Another two group of sculptures actually existed at the entrance to Brandenburgerstraße from Fehrbelliner Platz sculpted by Arno Breker, but those were removed after the Second World War. Those sculptures depicted more religious scenes rather than focusing on the people of Germany depicting St. George killing a dragon and Holy Christophorus with baby Jesus.<sup>19</sup> It is confusing as to why these were included on the façades of the building as Hitler had made clear in a speech in 1938, confirmed by Alfred Rosenberg (the Commissar for Supervision of Intellectual and Ideological Education) that religion and NS ideals were incompatible.<sup>14</sup> It is also confusing as to why the sculpture groups were removed as they were of a purely religious nature.

As noted during the Augustus period in the Roman Empire, the architecture then was also over scaled in an ambition to create and extend the reaches of the empire. As expressed in the poem 'The Aenied' by Virgil at around 20 B.C., it was assumed to Romans that they could 'exercise dominion over nations' and 'impose culture on peace', among other aspirations that the NSDAP literature frequently quoted. This purpose was expressed in the design of Fehrbelliner Platz as a modern view on neoclassicism: using more right angles and corners instead of cylinders and rounded edges, as well as art-deco styles in the stone carvings instead of staying true to the styles of classical antiquity.

Focusing more on the stone reliefs the importance of these stone elements were explained by Heinrich Himmler in a 1941 essay (German Castles in the East) published on Das Schwarze Korps. He wrote:

“When people are silent, the stones speak. By means of the stone, great epochs speak to the present so that fellow citizens are able to uplift themselves through the beauty of self-made buildings...The stones have not spoken in vain...the fields are German again. Buildings are always erected by people. People are children of their blood, are members of their race. As the blood speaks, so the people build.”<sup>17</sup>

From this party line statement, it is clear that the choice of using stone for all complementing designs (U-Bahnhof, building material, stone reliefs) was all focused onto the ‘Thousand Year Reich’ concept of building lasting monumental structures. In the light of Himmler’s philosophy, the limestone reliefs could be interpreted as a message for future generations of how that generation has toiled to build their ideal Germany even after they have long died.

The Roman forum-like shape of the plaza serves as a daily reminder of NS power through neoclassicism and Greek-style sculptures intended to last for a long time to represent the greatness of the German people. Fehrbelliner Platz is a prime example of NS stone-based architecture and how it propagates the power of the NSDAP through Greek and Roman elements in the details of the design.



## **Olympiastadion**

Originally constructed for the 1936 Summer Olympics on the same site used for the cancelled 1916 Summer Olympics, the Olympiastadion to Berlin is what the Flavian Amphitheater is to Rome.<sup>34</sup> Though the stadium was largely designed by March, Speer was also involved in the design.<sup>33</sup> Unlike the Tempelhof Airport, this entire complex was actually completed before the outbreak of the war.

At the main entrance of the Olympiastadion visitors are greeted by two tall pillars from which the five Olympic rings hang. This resembles the Roman use of 're-appropriated' Egyptian obelisks as a monument in important squares and plazas.<sup>10</sup> The stadium itself as a long screen of columns surrounding the outside of the building just like Greco-Roman buildings to impose a sense of scale and authority onto their buildings.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, the use of 'stone not iron', an idea that Speer promoted, increased the ruin value (Ruinengesetz) of the Olympiastadion. The stadium was built entirely of granite without the aid of steel girders or composite materials such as concrete because Speer believed that stone buildings are 'architectural proofs of the past of great nations'. Hitler approved of this idea of 'ruin value' after Speer had made references to the remains of classical antiquity buildings in Roman and Greek civilizations showing the importance of neoclassical ideals in creating a sense of lasting power through architecture.<sup>11</sup>

The Waldbühne just a few minutes walk away from the stadium of the immense complex resembles a Greek amphitheater. This is a clear example of how NS architecture is used to bring people together much like how the ancient Roman forums and Greek marketplaces intended to do. Much like the Nuremberg rallies in the 'Cathedral of Lights', Hitler hoped to create stages in Berlin where there could be a communal NS experience. The sheer size of the location and its resemblance to classical antiquity was meant to amplify the message of events.<sup>11</sup>

Another example of how place was used to bring people together can be found in the Maifeld just behind the stadium. Constructed facing the intentional gap in the stadium's seating forming an axis with the bell tower, Maifeld once hosted the state arrival of Mussolini to Berlin.<sup>11</sup> The flagpoles in the plaza in front of the stadium that once flew the flags of the nations of the world could equally be used to fly the insignia of the Hackenkreuz providing a propaganda-filled entrance to a Roman inspired complex for the dictator of Italy.

The statues and stone sculptures around the Olympiastadion premises show strong evidence of Greek influence. The ancient Greeks worship the athletic human body as the ideal form of the body through the erection of statues of nude athletes in poses that exaggerate their muscular contours.<sup>36</sup> The sculptures in the stadium complex not only include nude statues of athletic men and women in their ideal form, but also incorporate horses, laurels, and swords among other Roman motifs into the designs.<sup>12</sup>

The Olympiastadion complex has specifically used Greek methods of congregating people for a common cause, Roman architecture to preserve the long-term value of the buildings, and then Greek styles to model their athletic statues after. The stadium is an example where Hitler has directed architects to revive designs from museums and apply them in real life use.<sup>20</sup>

## **Conclusion**

From the three prominent examples of NS architecture aimed at power projection to both foreigners and locals, there are some clear neoclassical themes that run through all of the structures. The use of stone to monumentalize and increase the buildings' 'ruin value' is consistent across three NS buildings. Limestone or granite sculptures and reliefs are also themes, which are deeply rooted in neoclassical tradition.

While the Tempelhof Airport had an ambition to be a Greek-style amphitheater for air shows, most of the influence for the completed structure is Roman. Fehrbelliner Platz uses the location and purpose of the building to project authority to local citizens, but contains a fair amount of appreciation to Greek antiquity through building details. Lastly, the Olympiastadion complex contains multiple buildings that use Greek styles of building to achieve Hitler's aspirations of recreating the might of Rome.

It is apparent from the analysis that neoclassical themes were extensively used in the NS period in Berlin to exert the authority of the NSDAP. In hindsight, it is consoling to know that most of the buildings' future additions were never realized, but it would be interesting to make models to see what effect they would achieve should they have been completed.

In the future, it would be worth investigating several aspects of the buildings for a deeper appreciation of their history. The Tempelhof Airport was not built exactly symmetrical for the purpose of not blocking takeoff wind. It would be worth investigating if those facts were taken into account before the building was built, if the building could have been built symmetrically.

Likewise, it is a mystery as to why the NSDAP would have allowed religious figures to appear on the side of a government building. Could it have been an act of civil disobedience by Arno Breker, or did the NSDAP want to infer authority from certain aspects of Christian beliefs? It is equally intriguing to find out why the allied forces removed those religious façades and left the façades with clear links to NS untouched.

For the Olympiastadion, most of the structures were completed, but allied forces removed many details with ties to NS. It is worth discussing if the anonymous 'voids' could be filled in by adding new details to the complex to inspire the German people without invoking the horrors of the past. A careful and respectful inquiry into the future role of the Olympiastadion will not only give the building purpose but also internal reconciliation for the people of Germany and hopefully the topic of NS history will no longer be taboo.

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