

### **Olympiastadion – Germania and Beyond**

My personal interest with the Olympiastadion began the first week I arrived in Berlin. Having only heard about Adolf Hitler's plans for a European Capital from documentaries and seen pictures of Jesse Owen's legendary victories in the ill-timed 1936 Summer Olympics, I decided to make a visit myself. As soon as I saw the heavy stone colonnade from the car park I knew it could only have been built for one purpose – propaganda for the Third Reich beyond Germania.

Remodelled for the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin by Hitler's favorite architects Werner March (whose father, Otto March, designed the original 1913 stadium) and Albert Speer, the Olympiastadion was a symbol of power for the National Socialist party and an opportunity to present propaganda in the form of architecture.

Being the westernmost structure on Hitler's 'capital city of the world', the stadium was designed to present the then National Socialist Germany to the rest of the world as a power to be reckoned with. Any visitor to the stadium doesn't only see the gigantic stadium, but also experiences the whole Olympic complex. Visitors would arrive at a 10-platform S-Bahn station able to serve at high frequencies for large events and then walk several hundred meters with a clear view of the huge imposing stone stadium as soon as visitors reached the car park.

Though some might argue that neither the U- nor S-Bahn stations named after the stadium provided convenient access to the sports grounds, one has to consider the scale of the event. The stadium could accommodate up to 100,000 people, so the immense scale of the plaza in front of the stadium and its car park serve as a buffer so hoards of visitors could arrive safely with plenty of space. The long walk also served the purpose of heightening expectations and creating a sense of suspense for incoming visitors then exceeding their expectations by presenting them with the largest stadium in the world.

Though a larger stadium for 400,000 people was planned for Nuremburg, March and Speer spared no expense when it came to decorating the stadium with Graeco-Roman themed ornaments. In the spirit of National Socialist neo-classicism, giant torches lit the colonnade from the inside and hooks and flagpoles were made available to hand wreaths and drape swastika flags all over the building. Nude statues of athletes that worship the pure form of the body in an ancient Greek manner adorn the open space and stairs leading up to the stadium. The grand entrance to the stadium alone commands fear and reverence.

Unlike most modern stadiums, the half underground and half above ground Olympiastadion has outdoor corridors running perpendicular to the colonnade. No shops, no service centers, no information counters, no nonsense. The facade created a sense of depth by not putting anything in the corridors; the stadium walls are obscured behind the colonnade and balcony-like corridors, fading into darkness even in the light of day. Visitors walking into the stadium feel as if German stone has engulfed them before being thrown into the bare, sunlit stadium.

Looking straight ahead, visitors can see through the gap in the stadium all the way to the bell tower that overlooks the Maifeld. It was clear that the stadium was going to be reused in the Thousand Year Reich for political rallies and demonstrations to boast the might of a National Socialist Germany after the Olympics. Between the gaps sits the Olympic Torch on a pedestal for the people of the world to see a flame lit by the sun in Greece and carried all the way over to Berlin by 3000 runners.

Coming to its functional aspects after the 1936 Summer Olympics, why didn't the allied armies destroy this monument of evil as they did the Kanzleramt and the flak towers? Same as the answer to the Tempelhof Airport and buildings of government departments of the Third Reich – practicality. Being a large stadium in the middle of a sporting complex, the new occupiers of Berlin found more value in the stadium's existence than its destruction.

Up until 1994, the British occupying forces also used the adjacent Maifeld for their annual celebration of the Queen's Birthday, completing the stadium's original purposes for political rallies in the most unexpected way. With a makeshift roof added for the 1974 FIFA World Cup group A matches and then a replacement steel and canvas roof added for the 2006 FIFA World Cup finals, the Olympiastadion in Berlin is still well-used. Since then it has also hosted the FIFA Womens World Cup, UEFA Champions League Final, as well as concerts for numerous well-known pop artists. During the renovations it was decided that the running track was to be colored blue to match the stadium's natural stone's light walnut color as well as Hertha BSC's (who now calls the stadium its home) team color. Advocates for more traditional sports grounds will be relieved to know that the underground practice track is in burgundy.

Having walked through the entire complex I find that the monumental properties of the Olympiastadion still impress visitors today. I find that the main effect comes from placing a gigantic building in the middle of the forest. The perfect place to put a structure that architects didn't want visitors to compare with other buildings. It is a little difficult to feel how the propaganda machine must have been, the government has done a thorough job in cleansing the building from the shameful history its connected to.

Fortunately for Europe, the war against fascism was won, but it meant that many of the structures of the Welthauptstadt remained uncompleted. The Olympiastadion is the largest of the completed original structures (along with the streetlights on the Straße des 17 Juni, the Air Ministry Building, and Fehrbelliner Platz just to name a few) showing how ambitious Hitler was to impose Germany as the new world superpower through ambitiously scaled architecture and grandiose urban planning.

**Appendix**

Interestingly, the stadium that the Olympiastadion replaced was the Deutsches Stadion located within the now demolished Grünewald Racecourse. The Deutsches Stadion was built in 1913 in preparation for the cancelled 1916 Olympics and was dug into the ground because it would otherwise obstruct the view to the racecourse from the racecourse stands.

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