



Speer: Drawing the Future of the Past

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Abstract. For Albert Speer, official architect of the Third Reich, the graphical representation of architecture played an important role, more than was normal in his profession. A series of early sketches exchanged with Adolf Hitler have been preserved as witnesses to the architectural debates between them, forerunners of major projects implemented by armies of technicians at his service. Moreover, the dictator and the architect shared another unique interest, a nostalgic attraction for paintings and engravings depicting ruins of the great ancient empires. This peculiar interest gradually became an obsession as to how the ruins of the works they were building would be seen in the future. This is like the funeral arrangements for a baby being established before it has even been born. This fixation resulted in idealised perspectives, commissioned by the architect during the construction of the works, and in other clandestine drawings produced during his captivity in Spandau prison. The text specifically analyses the role of graphical representation in the concept of the perception of future ruins through artistic references from the past, reflections written in his memoirs and drawings by Speer himself. Although his architectural and urban development work has been extensively analysed, his drawings have not aroused much interest, despite their importance to him. This activity also allowed him, during the twenty years he spent in prison, to record and summarise his memories and lost dreams on paper.

Keywords: Speer · Ruin drawings · Nazi architecture

1 Introduction

In 1937, the young German architect Albert Speer (1905–1981) was appointed General Building Inspector by Adolf Hitler. His task was to carry out Hitler's plans to modernise the country, providing the technical knowledge that the *Führer* lacked. Speer's relatively young age, at sixteen years younger than Hitler, also seemed enough guarantee that in the event of Hitler's death Speer could still complete the momentous mission entrusted to him: to plan and manage the great works of the New Germany, whose completion was scheduled for the nineteen fifties. One year earlier, in 1936, the architect had emphasised the key role assigned to architecture within the ideology of the Third Reich:

“Building is not a mere pastime for the *Führer*, but a serious way of setting in stone the will of the National Socialist movement” [1]. In *Mein Kampf* [2], Hitler had already referred to his personal relationship with architecture: “I could read or draw until the small hours of the morning without ever getting tired [...] Along with music, I thought architecture was the queen of the arts” [3]. Hitler initially wanted to become a painter and applied to study at Vienna’s Academy of Fine Arts but was rejected. As many of his drawings were on architectural themes, he was recommended to study architecture (Figs. 1 and 2).



Fig. 1. Adolf Hitler. Caricatures. 1916. Available at: <https://leganerd.com/2011/04/04/xkcd-hitler/>



Fig. 2. Adolf Hitler. *Ratzenstadel in Old Vienna*. 1912. Available at: <https://www.imageselect.eu/dk/stock-photo/ratzenstadel.html>

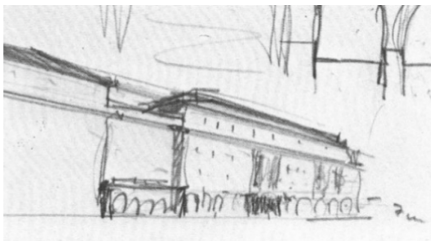


Fig. 3. Speer, A., 193? Sketch of a building for the Great Axis of Berlin. Source: Krier, 1985. p. 59.

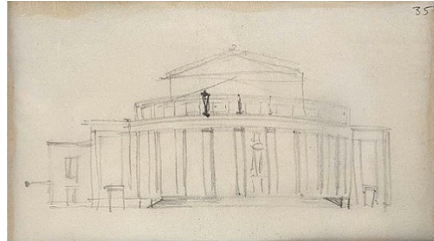


Fig. 4. Hitler, A., 1940. Sketch of the Linz Opera. Available at: <https://www.imageselect.eu/dk/stock-photo/linz-opera.html>

One might assume that, as was the case in the political and military spheres, the authority of the dictator would prevail and there would be no discussion as part of this architectural collaboration. However, Speer claimed not to have felt such pressure: “Hitler, who saw himself as an architect, respected the specialist’s superiority in this field” [4]. Until well into World War II, when his unexpected appointment as Reich Minister of Armaments and War Production in 1942 conclusively interrupted the work of his studio, Speer was fully engaged in grandiose projects for the Third Reich that the two debated. They would exchange sketches and plans that still survive to this day (Figs. 3 and 4). The architect Ernst Neufert referred to that appointment as minister in an appeal filed by Speer’s wife in 1955: “In private conversations with Speer, he gave me the impression that he was aware of the risks he was taking in accepting

positions of responsibility” [5]. At the end of the war, the long sentence of twenty years of imprisonment (1946–66) he was given in Nuremberg would provide him with enough spare time to draw and reflect on his life, architecture and responsibilities, leaving a written record of it all. His true role in the Nazi government was always controversial, although the appearance of certain compromising documents in 2017 would make him seem responsible, *a posteriori*, for war crimes that could possibly have cost him his life had they come to light in the Nuremberg trial. After his release in 1966, Speer published his first *Memoirs* [6]. Subsequent works such as *Spandau: The Secret Diaries* in 1975 [7], expanded his autobiography. They all became best-sellers that earned him millions of dollars. Half a century after the publication of Speer’s first autobiography, the feeling remains that the political prejudices and morbid curiosity aroused by his confessions, lies and silence surrounding his political responsibilities within the Nazi government led to his professional work fading into the background. In 1985, Leon Krier, in what is perhaps the most exhaustive monograph published on Speer’s architectural work, looked at this idea in more detail [8].

It is clear that there were very few people like Speer who had so much first-hand information about Adolf Hitler, since Hitler’s interest in architecture led to a closeness between the two, almost a friendship. In fact, in his statements to the Nuremberg tribunal, Albert Speer made a striking assertion: “If Hitler had had friends, I would have been one of them...” His memoirs and the many interviews he gave to various media organisations between 1966 and 1981 provide information about the dictator’s particular relationship with architecture and urban planning. Speer’s written reflections on architecture have not aroused as much curiosity, although it is obvious that in that area, he would have nothing to hide, justify or manipulate. Authors such as Jesús Arizmendi and Leon Krier also had the opportunity to meet him while he was alive and interview him in the years after his release from prison. Other authors such as Alexander Scobie (1990) [9] and Keiko Ishida (2020) [10] have analysed his theories about future ruins. The latter, indicating significant differences between Speer’s Theory of Ruin Value and that of painters and architects from the 18th century. However, and in general, not enough attention has been paid to Speer and Hitler’s interest in the graphical representation of ruins and their historical references. The main objective of this text is to analyze the importance of graphic representation in Speer’s figure and work, especially in his idea of future ruins, considering his artistic references to the past and the reflections recorded in his memoirs and drawings.

2 A Fascination with Ruins

According to the members of the military who were closest to him, even in wartime, when the fronts were forcing him to constantly take important military decisions, Hitler would spend almost as much time on construction as he did on his military duties. But, despite his unhealthy obsession, Hitler’s architectural culture, bewitched as he was by an idealised classical world, was limited and disorderly. In his memoirs, Speer refers to the dictator’s fascination with the ruins of historical civilisations, recalling, for example, that when he visited him in Obersalzberg, his mountain residence, there was an 18th century Romantic painting of some Roman ruins on the wall (Fig. 5), produced by the architect and painter Giovanni Paolo Pannini (1691–1765) [11].



Fig. 5. Pannini, G. P., No date. *Roman ruins with the Blind Belisarius*. Available at: <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/c010054646>

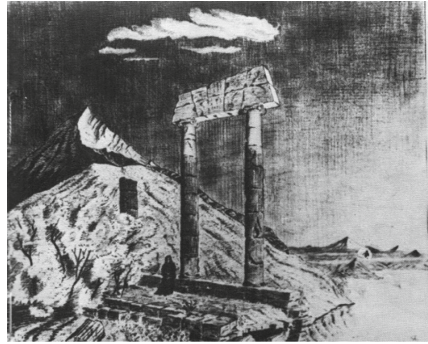


Fig. 6. Speer, A., 1940–50? Drawing of Roman ruins produced in Spandau prison. Source: Arizmendi, 1978, p. 201.

Speer was also previously captivated by the melancholic representation of ancient ruins: “I always had a romantic fondness for ruined fortresses and winding alleys, which later manifested itself in my passion for collecting landscapes, especially those by Heidelberg painters from the Romantic period” [12]. Talking about painting during his time in Spandau, Speer also recalled his interest: “I have continued to feel an attraction towards the solitude of the forest: castle ruins and fountain nymphs from the early 19th century” [13]. It is a Romantic vision in which we can see a Ruskinian interpretation of zero intervention in ruins [14], which is revealed in Speer’s imaginary, and clandestine, drawings. It must be remembered that, in theory, he was banned from reading and drawing, although these were reasonably tolerated during his captivity (Fig. 6). In the 1941 book, *Neue Deutsche Baukunst*, (*New German Architecture*) [15], an official publication showing the major projects of the Nazi government, completed, planned or under construction, Speer, as head of construction for the Greater Germanic Reich, justifies the Nazi government’s investment in architecture over other arts, posing this question in terms of “historical return”:

Architecture has always been linked to truly great eras through its most powerful works. In these they are formed, embodied, summarised into perennial signs that last for centuries and millennia, much more than the manifestations of other arts [...] We can still read the great epochs of history the in architectural monuments of today [16].

Gradually, Speer and Hitler developed a great interest in the perception that future generations would have of the ruins of Nazi monuments. Both were very clear that it was architecture itself that could convey the greatness of an empire, much more than other arts. Speer recalled, from Spandau, how Hitler considered that only monuments could evoke the great historical epochs of history [17]. In 1985, Leon Krier defended in his book the value of the Speer’s work, considering that, in any case, “Architecture is not political. For better or worse, it is a tool used by politicians” [18]. He also highlights

testimonies from leading figures in German architecture such as Tessenow, Bonatz, Neufert and others who did not doubt the “extraordinary stature of Speer as an architect and leader”, they considered that “his unusual artistic talents and ambitions would have allowed him to pursue a stellar career in any political system” [19]. A few years before his death, Albert Speer was invited to write the foreword, in which he refers to this topic [20]:

Hitler wanted temporary effects and a permanent testimony in case his empire fell after centuries. “The ruins of our buildings will bear witness to the strength of our will”. He never thought he could fail. When he fell from power after a few years, the palaces and stadiums that were to guarantee his place in history disappeared. All that remains of this unique need to construct is this book and a handful of photographs, blueprints and models.

3 The Graphical Representation of Ruins

When in 1934 a hangar was demolished to build the Nuremberg Zeppelinfeld (Fig. 7), Speer sensed something that would completely determine the approach to Nazi architecture and its relationship with ruins. Observing the bleak image of the jumble of rusty iron bars and remains of reinforced concrete in the demolished structures, he concluded that this would never be the right image to convey the impact and grandeur of the works of the Third Reich to future generations.

Taking the Roman models as a reference, and faced with the dilemma of using the construction technologies from his time or creating a classic and “dignified” image, he chose the latter, deciding that in the future it would be better not to use metal or reinforced concrete structures [17]. With this idea, the architect considered that the usual tool of



Fig. 7. An American tank lies burned out in the Zeppelinfeld stadium grandstand, Nuremberg, 1945. Available at: <https://imgur.com/r/destroyedtanks/gNgcM>

architects, drawing, would be the most convincing argument to communicate his ideas to the *Führer*:

To illustrate my ideas, I had a romantic drawing prepared. It showed what the reviewing stand on the Zeppelinfeld would look like after generations of neglect, overgrown with ivy, its columns fallen, the walls crumbling here and there, but the outline still clearly recognizable. In Hitler's entourage this drawing was regarded as blasphemous. That I could even conceive of a period of decline for the newly founded Reich destined to last a thousand years seemed outrageous to many of Hitler's closest followers. But he himself accepted my ideas as logical and illuminating. He gave orders that in the future the important building of his Reich were to be erected in keeping with the principle of this "law of ruins" [21].

Therefore, it would not be left to the passing of the centuries or millennia to determine what Nazi ruins would look like. Instead, new constructions would be built in the 20th century with their future image very much in mind: "one is aware of the need to create architectures that ensure, in times that are still very far off, a ruin of enlightened or Piranesian inspiration" [22]. As suggested by Keiko Ishida, this concept is still a contradiction, as deep down he considers a ruin as a sign of the decline of a culture associated with power [23]. Albert Speer set down his and the Führer's approaches in writing when he wrote, in 1936, *Die Ruinenwerttheorie (The Theory of Ruin Value)*, where he continuously refers to the evocative power of Roman and Egyptian ruins.

Although Albert Speer claimed that he was responsible for the originality of the concept of a "future ruin", he was in fact following the tenets of another architect much admired by Adolf Hitler: Gottfried Semper (1803–79). Semper was the author, among other significant works, of the Dresden Opera building (Fig. 8), and had previously proposed using natural materials to avoid "industrial" steel structures. Other precedents, such as the well-known drawing (1830) by John Soane (actually produced by his collaborator Joseph Gandy) of the Bank of England in ruins (Fig. 9), would have been familiar to the well-informed Speer.



Fig. 8. Hitler visiting the Dresden Opera building in 1934. Available at: <https://www.saechsische.de/plus/mit-hitler-im-dresdner-schauspielhaus-5133416.html>



Fig. 9. Soane, J., 1830. Drawing of the future ruins of the Bank of England. Source: Middleton, 1999, p. 222.

The architect identified so much with the suggestive idea of ruins that he gave up the modern technologies for structural feats such as the immense dome of the Volkshalle, two-hundred and fifty metres in diameter, planned to be raised in the centre of Berlin (Fig. 10). The calculations suggested that even a solid dome could feasibly be built. However, with partial scale models it was confirmed that due to the marshy terrain in Berlin, the foundations would not support the weight. “In keeping with my “Theory of Ruin Value”, I would have willingly avoided using steel, but in this case Hitler had some qualms” [24]. The future impression of the ruins was therefore given priority over technique.

In his doctoral thesis on Speer published in 1978, Jesús Arizmendi, architect and professor from the Faculty of Architecture in San Sebastián, draws attention to the over-sizing of these constructions due to the fact that the structures were built according to primitive static principles that were not in keeping with Germany’s technical capacity: “Massive stone structures were good in Hitler’s eyes: the stone block remains essentially unchanged in its qualities of strength and durability” [25].

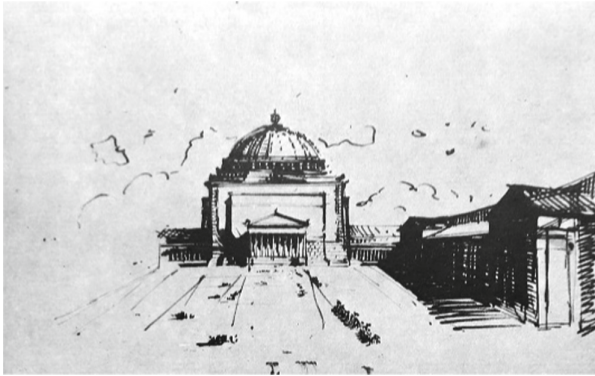


Fig. 10. Speer, Albert, 1937, Drawing of the Grosse Halle. Source: Krier, 1985. p. 9.

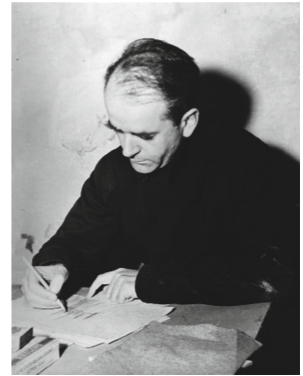


Fig. 11. Albert Speer, drawing in Spandau Prison. 1950. Available at: <https://waralbum.ru/photo/people/page/804/?page=1>

In the fifteen years between his release from prison and his death in 1981, Speer — always seeking a difficult justification for his past — agreed to be interviewed by all kinds of press outlets and researchers. Among others, Arizmendi witnessed his stubbornness about the drawings of ruins that he kept (Fig. 11 and 12) [26]:

Speer himself was kind enough to give me some copies of the drawings he had made during his long sentence [...] They are destruction, dead life, and they constitute an overwhelming image of *ancient grandeur*. They do not possess vital heat but they still exist, full of the past, although devoid of utility and function.

4 The Real Ruins of Horror

Speer's internment was long and over the two decades of his imprisonment he only saw the outside of his prison walls on one occasion. In July 1947, he was transferred from a prison in Nuremberg to the one where he would spend the rest of his sentence, known as Spandau, close to Berlin. He would spend the last nineteen years of his captivity there. Through the windows of the plane and the van in which he was transferred between prisons, Speer was able to briefly contemplate the signs of devastation in a totally unrecognisable country. These were real ruins that did not look anything like the ones he had imagined with Hitler a few years earlier and that had been represented in their idealised perspectives. They were not, therefore, Romantic and aesthetic vestiges, shaped by the passage of time. Instead they were the true ruins of horror, of total annihilation (Fig. 13).

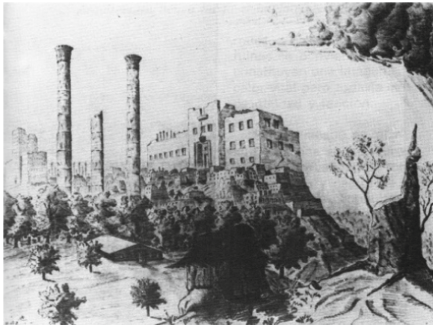


Fig. 12. Speer, A., 1940–50 Columns of the Volkshalle as ruins. Source: Arizmendi, 1978, p. 201.



Fig. 13. Photograph of Nuremberg in ruins, shortly after the end of the war, 1945. Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ruins_of_Nuremberg_after_World_War_II.jpg

5 Speer and the Modern Movement

The Nazi regime's lack of understanding and rejection of the rationalists was evident in Hitler's negative comments about modern architecture, made clear in the speech he delivered at the 1935 Nazi Party Congress "As long as the characteristic features of our cities have department stores, markets, hotels and offices in the form of skyscrapers as their incomparable exponents today, we cannot talk of art or true culture" [27]. In Speer's case, his concept of "future ruins" could never fit into a Modern Movement with which he agreed eventually but never really understood, judging by his testimonies. The architectural vanguards were totally at odds with any academic historicism and a nostalgia for ruins like the one he proposed would not make any sense. As an architect, Speer was a classicist who considered himself as a kind of Romantic swimming against the tide, opposed "to the metropolis and the type of human created by it", and consequently, to

the architects of modern culture. He would have identified more with the urban theories of Frank Lloyd Wright on the decentralisation of American cities, although we do not know whether he was familiar with them since he makes no reference to them in his writings “When I analyse my architectural ideas again, I see that everything I wanted to build during the thirties was basically down to a rebellion against the modern, which led to me becoming Tessenow’s assistant. It is surely no coincidence that Gropius and Mies van der Rohe were the ones who interested me least as a young architect [28]”.

Despite Speer’s rejection of the Modern Movement, the well-known German architect Ernst Neufert, who had studied at the Bauhaus, been a collaborator of Walter Gropius and had no political interests, claimed in 1955 that Speer, from his position of great responsibility in the architecture of the government, never interfered in the work of the rationalists: “All the important German architects of the time had direct or indirect contact with Speer [...] he used his high rank, to the best of his ability, to give the rationalists a broader field of action. He was a man who never asked anyone if they belonged to the party or not” [8]. In 1975, in some enigmatic comments, Albert Speer lamented the proliferation of standardised international constructions in the rebuilt Germany, “the end of styles” at the hands of an insensitive technical approach that was destroying the poetry and craftsmanship of architecture, which, according to him, for once made him feel a connection with his vilified Le Corbusier:

Is what has disappeared nothing more than our forced classicism? It is possible that all desire for configuration has gone. That would be the end not only of one or more styles, but rather of architecture itself. In such a perspective I see, not without surprise, Scharoun and Corbusier, Poelzig and Mendelsohn next to me, and on the other side, the engineers of the 21st century conveyor belt style of architecture [29].

6 Conclusions

The desire of Hitler and Speer, through the grandiose works of the Third Reich, to transcend time resulted in dreams being depicted that anticipated the melancholic vision that future generations would have of Nazi ruins, thus continuing a pictorial tradition representing the ruins of the constructions built by great empires from the past. The studies on the architect do not give due consideration to what graphical expression really meant to Speer. However, through the direct testimonies of those who knew him personally and from reading his memoirs and texts, we can deduce that drawing was, in addition to a frequent means of communication with Hitler and a regular working tool for his projects, a way to recreate his dreams of a repetitive nostalgic future. It was also a mental refuge allowing his mind to escape during his captivity.

In reality, Speer, unable to understand the decisive role that the Modern Movement was going to play in the history of architecture, was not just proposing a way to let the future know about what in their day were the impressive buildings of the Third Reich. For a young architect like him, who put his strong ambition before the dramatic potential long-term consequences of his political commitment to the Nazi regime, these drawings and ruins fundamentally signified his aspiration to go down in history, searching for an honourable place among the great architects of all time. With regard to this excessive

ambition, it is interesting to reflect on his brief response to the last question that the British journalist Roger Clark asked him in December 1979, as part of a long four-day interview with the BBC [30]: “Mr Speer, if could live your life over again, would you prefer to a famous war criminal or a nonentity who had led a blameless life? Speer’s response was startling: “I would prefer to be famous” [31].

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