

Olympiastadion Berlin: Embodying Nazi Politics through Architecture

“When people experience inwardly periods of greatness, they represent those periods through external forms. Their word thus expressed is more convincing than the spoken word: it is the word in stone.”¹

- Adolf Hitler

While architectural movements and tastes change over time, certain buildings indomitably illustrate the character of the time and place in which they were created. One such building is the Berlin Olympic Stadium, which served as the centerpiece of the Summer Olympic Games of 1936. Through this stadium, along with the accompanying Games, the Nazis presented the international community with a carefully-constructed image of German power, prestige, and ambition. Calculated political motives shaped every architectural decision related to the Olympic construction, and in the case of the Stadium and its surroundings, quite literally, form followed politics – a politics that notably excluded Jews, Gypsies, and other non-Aryans. Over the ensuing decades, the Stadium has outlasted the politics that created it, transitioning from a Nazi showpiece to a popular athletic venue. Nonetheless, in both its architecture and its history the Olympic Stadium remains indelibly linked with its uncomfortable past.

The decision to award the 1936 Olympics to Berlin was made in 1931, two years before the ascension to power of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party. Initial plans called for a modernization of the existing German Stadium, which held a capacity of only 30,000. In 1933, in response to this

¹ Brian Ladd, "The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape" (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1997) pp. 127.

dictate, Werner March – the son of Otto March, the creator of the existing Stadium – proposed a modern construction of steel and reinforced concrete with an increased capacity of 80,000. The International Olympic Committee accepted his plans in June 1933.

Adolf Hitler was far less accommodating. The Olympics presented the Nazis with an unprecedented international stage, upon which they intended to show the world an imperial power in the tradition of the Roman Empire. March's modernist stadium was utterly incompatible with this vision, lacking both the monumental scale and the neo-classical form that served as the basis for Hitler's architectural aesthetic. Legend has it that the dispute over the stadium led Hitler to threaten to cancel the Olympic Games entirely. It was only through the actions of Albert Speer – who allegedly designed the stadium's neo-classical façade overnight – that the Games were saved. Speer's design, which seated 120,000 in a steel frame sheathed in the severe stone pillars and colonnades characteristic of Nazi architecture, was itself not large enough to match Hitler's greater ambition: an even grander stadium to be located in Nuremberg, seating 400,000 and serving as the location for the Olympic Games in perpetuity after the 1940 Games in Tokyo. Nonetheless, it was an interim measure that Hitler was willing to accept.²

Massive, monolithic, and commanding, the Olympic Stadium was consciously designed both to evoke comparisons to the Colosseum in Rome and to impose its will on all who set foot on its grounds. Visitors approached the Stadium across a wide-open cement plaza, over which towered two massive stone pillars, between which hung the Olympic rings. After entering through stone gatehouses, visitors passed by austere stone columns, colonnades decorated with images of Olympic figures, and grand concourses, all lined with an abundant supply of flags bearing the

² <http://source.ie/issues/issues0120/issue15/is15revstadiu.html>. March 4, 2003.

Nazi swastika. This monumental theme was also raised within the stadium interior – most pointedly in the heavy stone construction that served as the border of the VIP seating areas. The intended message behind all of this was obvious: Nazi Germany was a force with which to be reckoned.

In addition to the Stadium itself, political motivations and Nazi neo-classicism also shaped its surrounding environment. The marathon gate at the western end of the Stadium opened directly onto the Maifeld, an open field 290 meters by 375 meters in size, designed by Werner March at the special request of Hitler and intended to be used for staged mass demonstrations. Across the Maifeld, March located Langemarck Hall, a severe neo-classical building topped with a massive podium, rows of seats, and a clock tower – the Glockenturm – over 77 meters tall. In the years following the Olympics, the Maifeld served as the venue for numerous Nazi rallies, including the most impressive Third Reich event to date in Berlin: the 1937 state visit of Benito Mussolini, leader of Italy. According to Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s Minister of Propaganda, over three million people took part in this ceremony, either along the route, in the Olympic Stadium, or on the Maifeld.

The Nazi party was exclusive and explicit about the identity of those allowed to take part in the pageantry of its Games. Non-Aryans and Gypsies were excluded from all Nazi sporting facilities and associations, including the Olympics, and Jewish athletes – including even world champions within their respective sports – were denied their rightful places on the 1936 German Olympic Team.³ To the Nazis, the Olympics were meant to conclusively demonstrate their ideal of Aryan

³ www.us-israel.org/jsource/Holocaust/olympics.html

racial superiority. When Jesse Owens deflated this myth, Hitler left the stadium before any of his medal presentations.⁴

After the final surrender of the Nazis in 1945, the architecture that had once served to glorify National Socialism was largely discredited. However, the Olympic Stadium – which remained largely undamaged throughout the Allied advance upon Berlin – offered functional capabilities too great to justify its demolition. This attribute, in combination with its enduring neo-classical popular appeal, has supported the Stadium throughout the last half century. Over that time, it has sustained major renovations, including a structural modernization in 1974, during which time a partial acrylic-glass roof was installed in order to meet the needs of the 1974 World Cup.⁵ The Olympic Stadium is currently undergoing another major renovation in anticipation of the 2006 World Cup Finals, which will take place on newly-restored turf underneath a new modern glass roof. The Stadium also serves as the home to Hertha BSC, Berlin’s soccer team.

Regardless of its playing field, roof, or occupants, Berlin’s Olympic Stadium has never been able to fully escape the specter of its Nazi past. The unadorned pillars and heavy stone that impressed visitors in 1936 are inescapable symbols of the Third Reich, and the Stadium today stands as a reminder of the ambitions and intentions of its creators. While some reviewers today find favor with its architecture, they have more difficulty overlooking its historical message – a “word in stone” that Germany has yet to, and may never completely, overcome.

⁴ <http://www.sfo.com/~csupes/Olympics/misc/index.htm?../1936Berlin/index.htm>. March 4, 2003

⁵ <http://www.sportsvenue-technology.com/projects/berlin/>. March 4, 2003.

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