



Coping with a bulky heritage: The Nazi party rally grounds in Nuremberg and the *Documentation Center*



The Congress Hall, site of the *Documentation Center* (2008)

(photo: Susanne Rieger)

Visitors approaching the city from the southeast suddenly must gather the impression that they took the wrong way to Nuremberg when they face a monumental building, at first sight looking like the spitting image of the Coliseum in Rome. It is shaped like a gigantic horseshoe with a vast empty space inside where the ruinous stands of the spectators are still visible. But there are various details disturbing the dignity of the *ancient* site: Twice a year the noisy and shrill Nuremberg *Volksfest* (public fair) takes place on the neighboring grounds. An aggressive steel and glass structure is piercing the solid stone walls at the northern corner of the building.

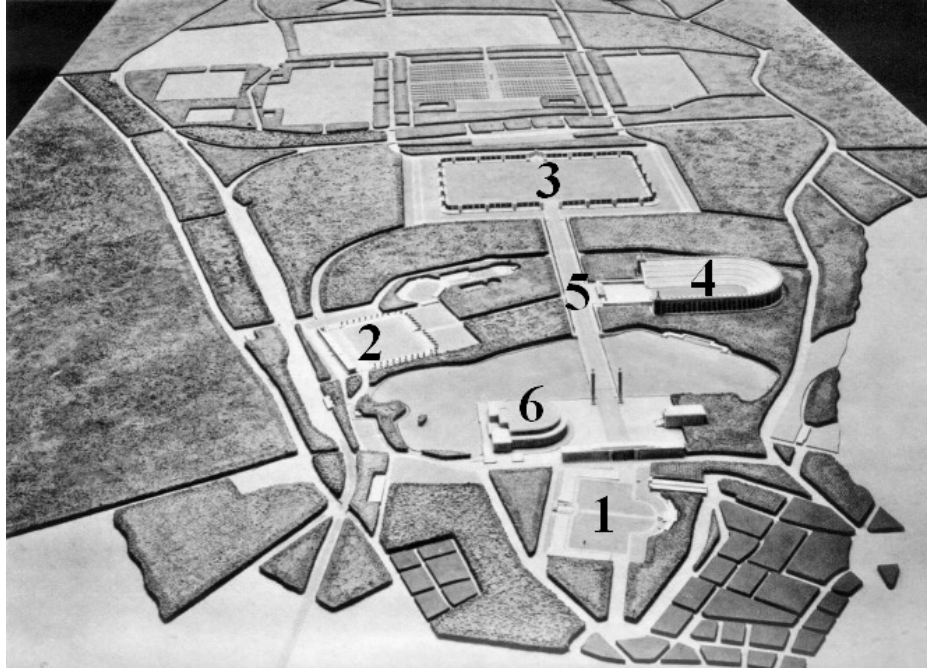


Close-up of the facade (2008)

(photo: Susanne Rieger)

The structures of the rally grounds

What looks like a modern version of Roman Emperor Nero's circus for *panem and circenses* (bread and games) is the Congress Hall at the northwestern edge of the former Nazi party rally grounds, stretching from here over several square miles to the southeast. The most prominent remnants of Hitler's plan to convert a mostly untouched landscape of lakes, meadows and woods into Nazi party's playground for its annual convention, are:



Overview model of the planned structures of the rally grounds

(photo: Franckhs Deutsche Städte-Chroniken: Nürnberg, 1938)

- 1) **Luitpoldarena:** Here the Nazis made use of a public park already in existence since 1906 and its surrounding facilities such as a WWI memorial and a convention hall, tiny in comparison to their plans at the lakeside of *Dutzendteich*. From 1935 to 1937 trees were felled and lawns surfaced with granite to make it a better dancing floor for goose-stepping. In the late 1950s the site was re-natured.



Ehrenhalle (hall of honor), formerly part of Luitpoldarena (2009)

(photo: Susanne Rieger)

- 2) ***Zeppelintribüne*** (Zeppelin Grand Stand) and ***Zeppelinfeld*** (Zeppelin Field): One of the few projects of the rally grounds completed (construction time 1935 - 1937), planned by Hitler's favorite architect Albert Speer. Two parts of the original ensemble are missing today: the gold-painted Swastika on top of the grand stand was blown up right after the victory parade of the US Army in April 1945 and the colonnades to the left and right, destroyed for endangering visitors by their lacking static in 1967. The name of the site originates from the landing of a Zeppelin airship in 1909.



Zeppelin Grand Stand (1938)

(photo: Franckhs Deutsche Städte-Chroniken: Nürnberg, 1938)

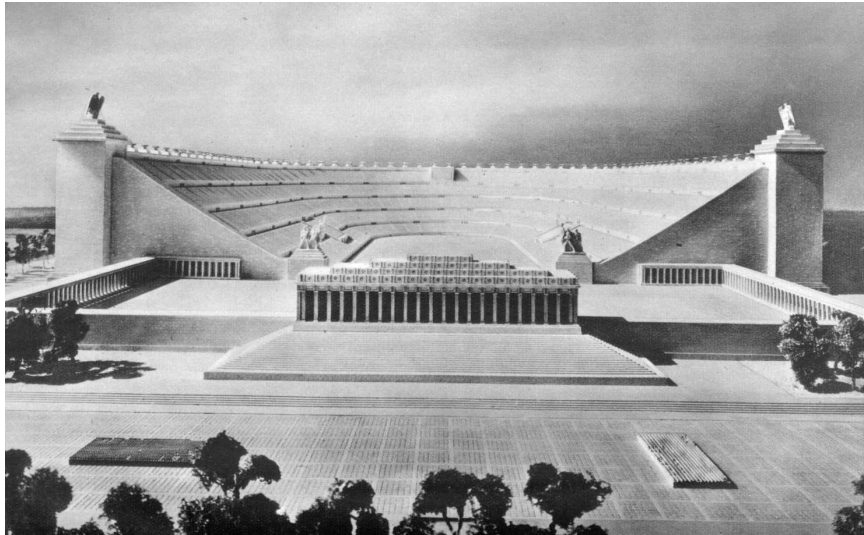


Zeppelin Grand Stand (2015)

(photo: Susanne Rieger)

- 3) ***Märzfeld*** (March Field): a rectangle of stands and towers in which place the postwar suburb of *Langwasser* was built.

- 4) **Deutsches Stadion** (German Stadium): What is left of Hitler's hybrid plan to build the world's largest sports stadium here is only the huge excavation, now filled up with ground water forming another pond in the area of the *dozen ponds* what is meant by the German word *Dutzendteich*.



Model of Deutsches Stadion

(photo: Franckhs Deutsche Städte-Chroniken: Nürnberg, 1938)

- 5) **Große Straße** (Great Road): In order to prepare an adequate environment for the parades of the *Wehrmacht* (German armed forces) an airfield-like approx. 1.3 miles long and 200 ft. broad granite covered road was laid across *Dutzendteich* lake connecting *Märzfeld* and



Great Road (2008)

(photo: Susanne Rieger)

- 6) **Congress Hall**: The construction work for the building started in 1935. Though today's ruins give the impression of an amphitheater, it was supposed to be covered by the world's largest glass roof providing seats for 50,000 spectators. The war prevented this project like many others to be finished.

SS-Kaserne (SS Barracks, not in the overview model): Not immediately on the rally grounds, but in the close vicinity the infamous *Schutzstaffel* positioned their barracks as the guardians of the party's forum (construction time 1937 - 1939). Today the building houses a federal agency.



Former SS Barracks (2009)
(photo: Susanne Rieger)

Inherited stone monsters



Fragments of the galleries inside Congress Hall (2008)
(photo: Susanne Rieger)

After the end of war the City of Nuremberg inherited most of these urban sores at its south-eastern periphery. Finally after the withdrawal of the US Army from parts of the area in the

early 1990s the entire former stage for propagandistic *blood and soil* plays was reunited in German hands. In the meantime the attitude towards the remnants of the Third Reich oscillated between the wish to get rid of the buildings (and thus the own doomed past), pragmatic use and attempts to inform the ever growing number of tourists from all over the world about the history of the site.

The first sincere approach to cope actively with these grounds contaminated with ideological poison was the opening of the exhibition *Fascination and Terror* inside Zeppelin Grand Stand in 1984 and the erection of four information displays at prominent points of the area in 1989. A new stage was reached when in 1997 the City, the Free State of Bavaria and the German Government agreed upon funding and constructing a *Documentation Center* in Congress Hall which opened on November 4, 2001.

Explaining Nazism



Entrance of the *Documentation Center with Education Forum on top* (2009)

(photo: Susanne Rieger)

Already the name of the then 22 million DM project indicates one of the many difficulties in handling history: What can be done in a place like this to explain the meaning of the site in the context of Nazism, i.e. what has to be *documented* there in which way?

To install the facilities necessary for the exhibit, the planners choose to add a sculpture-like, almost industrial architecture to the original semi-ruinous structure of the northern *Kopfbau*, one of the two rectangular ends of this gigantic shoe for Nazism's aesthetic club-foot. Austrian architect Günther Domenig's concept of harshly contrasting if not visually decomposing the intimidating aura of the mostly windowless brick-walled rooms bears its message in itself and therefore may be considered as new dimension of dealing with Nuremberg's Nazi past.

Contents and design

On the other hand there are the contents and the design of the permanent exhibit: A fixed lineup of topics which are explained by panels, video installations and audio-guides in various languages. The concept is to cover almost every aspect of Nazism: its political development, the function of the Nuremberg party rallies, World War 2, the Holocaust, the Nuremberg tri-

als, the use of the *Reichsparteitagsgelände* after the war, Nazi buildings in other German cities and more.



Confronting old and new: spike allowing the visitors a bird's view into the torso of Congress Hall (2008)
(photo: Susanne Rieger)

In the beginning such a universal claim seemed immodest but after the *Documentation Center* has become the by far most successful municipal Nuremberg museum measured by its visitors, such criticism is obsolete. A remodeling of the permanent exhibit which soon will be necessary to keep up with the technical development as well as the changing ways of perception by younger people will offer the chance also to revise its contents.

In general the planners of the current presentation did not trust the *genius loci*, in a place like this better put as the haunting demons still loafing about in those rooms, but obviously felt the desire of adding to it:

Dimmed lighting and dark colors (to me both a contradiction to Domenig's architecture and the task of making things visible), punched metal displays with pseudo-aggressive conical shapes (sheet metal is sheet metal and will never become a weapon to kill the vampire of Nazism) as well as sometimes irritating installations such as a bust of Hitler displayed on a base in a niche and spotlighted from below, thus gaining the quality of a demonic shrine or square glassed pits in the floor giving the impression of archeological excavations by showing pieces of Nazi memorabilia such as a broken German soldier's helmet.

An extreme example for the failed usage of audio and video equipment as well as the dangers of not properly commented photographic sources in historical exhibits is shown towards the end of the by and large chronological walk: In the section about WW2 and the Holocaust the visitor has to pass a narrow iron gangway, to its left and right allowing to look down into two stairwells. While being surrounded by the frightening sounds of an air raid, one is confronted by large scale photos of piles of dead bodies at the bottom of the former stairwells. Putting aside the (dubitable) shocking effect intended by this installation, what at best can be learned from it? Who are these people, victims of the Holocaust or German civilians killed in allied bombings? In the first case, is the suggestive message supposed to be mediated by connecting these particular pictures and sounds that the bombings of German cities were a retaliation for Auschwitz (of course they were not)? Otherwise, if the corpses were Germans, is it acceptable

to display them immediately after pictures of the deportation of Jews from Franconian cities delivering the often heard and repulsively simplifying message *We Germans suffered too?*

The Documentation Center since 2001 and its future

Besides many chances for improvements, the Documentation Center with its special exhibits, publications, film programs, lectures and panel discussions has evolved in a crystallizing point for research and education in contemporary history reaching out far beyond Nuremberg's city limits. Much has been achieved and a big challenge is lying ahead: an integrated concept for the entire Nazi party rally grounds making accessible and understandable its remainders for generations increasingly remote from the historic events.

Gerhard Jochem

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