

Book Review

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Harald Bodenschatz, Victoria Grau, Christiane Post and Max Welch Guerra, eds. 2025. *Urban Planning in Nazi Germany: Attack, Triumph, Terror in the European Context, 1933–1945*. Berlin: DOM Publishers, 624 pp., 700 images.

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Toward the middle of this colossal volume, we find a reflection that distills several of the book's central theses. It revolves around a well-known photograph—one whose significance is often overlooked, a serious mistake when dealing with a regime so profoundly invested in visual propaganda. In late June 1940, shortly after the Wehrmacht's capture of Paris, a group of Nazi officials flank Hitler as he strides resolutely through Trocadéro, the Eiffel Tower looming in the background. At the height of the military campaign, this image—both imposing and carefully staged—speaks about the regime's belief in urban design as a vehicle of power. Notably, the group's foreground is not occupied by the military commanders responsible for the victory, who appear instead in the background, but by the regime's favored architects and sculptor—Albert Speer, Hermann Giesler, and Arno Breker—who, alongside the Chancellor, appear to be surveying the urban landscape with transformation in mind. For the Nazi regime, the forging of a new order—its “constructive” dimension—was frequently entrusted to the organization of the built environment, with urban and territorial policies playing a particularly prominent role. “Urban planning,” the authors assert at the outset of the book, “was an essential instrument of the Nazi dictatorship”—not an ancillary, discursive epiphenomenon, nor a merely functional or cultural manifestation, but both means and end, condition and result of the regime's social, economic, political, and military program (p. 6).

This book is the crowning work of a broader, long-standing research project providing a panoramic reading of urban and spatial planning in Europe's twentieth-century dictatorships. Led by Harald Bodenschatz and composed of a growing team of scholars based in Germany, the project had already produced several large-format monographs focusing on the USSR, Fascist Italy, Francoist Spain, and Salazar's Portugal, along with transversal studies on specific issues such as the renewal of cities' historic centers. Most of these contributions, however, were previously available only in German. The volume under review constitutes the concluding piece of this series, focusing on the urban/territorial planning policies of the Third Reich, perhaps the most sensitive episode of the entire project. The team's effort to publish both a German and an English edition simultaneously is particularly commendable. While the former is poised to become an encyclopedic cornerstone of the German-language literature, the latter stands as the most thorough and comprehensive study on the subject available in English.

Working from the premise that how we define urban planning fundamentally determines the scope and implications of research, the authors adopt a broad conception that restores the wider social and political significance of spatial policies under the Third Reich. Methodologically, they emphasize the need to examine not only the formal outcomes of planning—built structures and drawn designs—but also the processes and relations involved in their production, the propaganda

frameworks that enveloped them, and the international connections shaping urban policy. The most obvious manifestation of this broad methodology is the rich typology of planning modalities and practices presented in the book. Structured chronologically in four-year intervals aligned with the book's subtitle, the volume maps three major phases: an initial "offensive" period of societal transformation and planning innovation from 1933 to 1937; a second phase of triumphant large-scale projects tied to economic recovery and the prospect of colonial expansion between 1937 and 1941; and a final, dramatic phase from 1941 to 1945, shaped by the exigencies of war and genocidal violence. Each part opens and closes with analytical sections that introduce and dissect the defining features of the respective period, setting them against an international backdrop. The core of each part consists of a catalogue of key planning and design fields, copiously illustrated with over 700 images, including a rich selection of previously unpublished maps and visual material. This exhaustive inventory of the regime's planning policies distinguishes the book from prior scholarship and enables the panoramic readings developed in its more theoretical chapters. The study not only examines urban design strategies proposed by prominent architects or the iconic plans for Berlin, Munich, or Nuremberg but also discusses large-scale infrastructural initiatives, inner-city renewal, housing policy, internal colonization and territorial expansion schemes, or the legal and conceptual frameworks of comprehensive planning, among many other problematics.

Special attention is paid to the political-economic and governance conditions that shaped the framework within which planning practices could unfold. One of the most striking of these conditions was the rescaling of the planner-state, marked by the gradual erosion of municipal competencies as certain party organizations, nation-state agencies, and individual actors gained increasing control over planning initiatives. A telling example is the trajectory of Berlin's planning office, which eventually became a subsidiary of the General Building Inspector. In its analyses, the book underscores the fluid, sometimes contradictory character of planning policies and their paradoxical relationship with the regime's broader strategies. Among the most incisive observations—one to which the book gives special emphasis—is the recognition that war served as the engine of economic development and an opportunity for planning while at the same time forcing the curtailment and eventual abandonment of many of the regime's most cherished projects.

The broad conception of urban planning allows the authors to restore a degree of internal coherence to the regime's spatial politics that is often absent from other studies. The profound restructuring of statehood under the Third Reich led to a proliferation of planning agencies, often with fragmented or even conflicting one-sided agendas, as their leaders competed for resources and the Führer's favor. This institutional turbulence has led some scholars to depict the period as fundamentally contradictory and improvisational—essentially a demonstration of the absence of any overarching planning strategy. Indeed, most of the regime's grand urban plans were either never implemented or only partially realized. However, by focusing on initiatives tied to the military-colonial project, the authors are able to reframe the era in more integrated—albeit much darker—terms, showing the prominent role of heterodox planning approaches such as those related with forced labor and concentration camps, the construction of military-industrial complexes, the deployment of war infrastructure for both offensive and defensive purposes, settler-colonial schemes, or the eradication of targeted populations in occupied territories.

This is not to say that well-known episodes are neglected. Particularly noteworthy is the section devoted to the redesign of Berlin, which goes beyond the usual focus on the monumental central area of the North-South axis to explore the plan's metropolitan, regional, residential, and infrastructural dimensions. Yet the book will be especially revelatory for English-speaking readers due to its in-depth analysis of less known strategies such as the schemes for Eastern colonization, which point toward a continental division of labor and the construction of a new European spatial order. This order was to be sustained by large-scale planning of resources—including

schemes to secure food supplies for the core of an expanded Reich—and logistical infrastructures, all tied to the mass redistribution of populations with unmistakably murderous intentions.

In this regard, some of the book's most significant contributions lie precisely where other works fall silent. It demonstrates that, contrary to widespread belief, the war years were not devoid of construction—nor of planning. One only has to shift perspective from the monumental neoclassical imagery that dominates the literature to the often rudimentary but pervasive architectures of oppression that marked the regime's final years. As the authors pointedly remark: "The common wooden barrack was . . . the most successful building type of the Nazi era . . . Ultimately, it is this, not the Great Hall in Berlin, that stands for the urban planning of the dictatorship. Words of stone, deeds of wood!" (p. 554).

The book concludes with several compelling final sections. First, the authors include a thoughtful account of postwar debates on the legacy of Nazi urbanism, a period that, according to the authors, cemented the simplistic identification of Third Reich planning with monumental architecture and figures like Troost, Speer, or Giesler. Second, there is a refined synthesis of the core features of National Socialist planning: its shifting dynamics and salient morphological traits, its articulation through propaganda, its legal-institutional foundations and international entanglements. The final chapter offers an epilogue on European "cultures of remembrance," calling for a renewed international debate on how we understand and address the architectural and spatial heritage of twentieth-century dictatorships.

Both specialists and general readers interested in the interplay between space and power during this period will find abundant value in this work, which is poised to become an indispensable reference for future scholarship on the subject.

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