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LOCATING THE MEMORY OF POLITICAL GENOCIDE IN THE TRADITION OF PEACE: TWO DOCUMENTATION CENTERS OF NAZISM IN GERMANY

Rumiko Handa

Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review , Vol. 30, No. 1, The Politics of Tradition (Fall 2018), pp. 35-36.
Published by International Association for the Study of Traditional Environments (IASTE)

How can architectural design assist in making the past present in meaningful ways when applied to buildings that commemorate troubling pasts? This dilemma becomes even more challenging when a preexisting building is located in a district that had provided citizens with a peaceful setting for leisurely activities before it was taken over for politically hostile purposes. Once that evil force has been eliminated, both city authorities and citizens may desire to return the district to its distant past, bringing peace back to the area. Yet they may also desire that the building carry their difficult memories of the more immediate past, so that it may provide lessons for the present and future. The question then becomes: What contributions can architectural design make toward these two, often conflicting, objectives?

The author is working on a research project that investigates and compares a number of documentation centers of Nazism in the former West Germany through careful on-site studies of the buildings supported by an archival study of materials including architectural drawings; correspondence between clients, architects, and architectural collaborators; and various records related to the design and construction of the buildings. The paper will present a portion of this project, and in particular compare historical contexts and design strategies for the Nazi Party Rally Grounds in Nuremberg and the House of Wannsee Conference Center in Berlin. The former was designed by the Nazis as the congress hall and is located in a city park that was originally a tree-filled recreation area before it was transformed by Albert Speer. The latter was a lakefront villa of a wealthy Berliner before it was taken over by the Nazis and used as a conference site to discuss implementation of the “final solution.”

A number of secondary research questions will also be posed. How did the prior histories and physical conditions of the preexisting buildings figure into the new design decisions? How did local, regional, national and international public opinion and politics influence the designs? What construction activities (e.g., additions, subtractions, or other changes) were needed to adapt existing buildings to new purposes? And how did the designs enhance various memory-inducing qualities of the preexisting buildings?

Architects are increasingly aware of and confronted with these and related questions in association with past programs of discrimination and genocide. A number of universities and communities today likewise face challenges concerning the use of names, images or sculptures that represent difficult pasts. A typical reaction is to destroy or remove the artifacts. But this approach does not eradicate the past itself; instead, it removes the chance to confront it. Conversely, preserving artifacts can be misconstrued as an affirmation of the past. The paper is part of a study that will lead to recommendations for future designs.