

Günther Domenig, architecture as mediation

The case of the Third Reich Congress Hall in Nuremberg

Dominique Trouche

Assistant Professor in Communication and Information Sciences at **University Toulouse III - Paul Sabatier**.
Author of *Les Mises en scène de l'histoire, Approche communicationnelle des sites historiques des Guerres mondiales*, L'Harmattan, 2010.

The Documentation Centre Nazi Party Rallying Grounds in Nuremberg, designed by Austrian architect Günther Domenig, is located in the former Congress Hall built during the National Socialist regime. The centre comprises a permanent exhibition, an educational forum and a bookshop. The centre's unique feature is a glass and steel footbridge that spans the north wing of the Congress Hall.

The role and function of this architecture, as conceived by Günther Domenig, is part of the issue of heritage and how it is passed on. The aim is to question the tension caused by the presence of two completely opposed architectures and how they are linked via the footbridge. What kind of mediation and transmission of memory and history does the footbridge offer? In the words of Georges Didi-Hubermann, did it allow us “to look at the images and see what they have survived. So that history, freed from the pure past (that absolute, that abstraction), helps us to open up the present of time” (2003, p. 226)?

Nuremberg: from imperial city to Documentation Centre

Linking Nuremberg to the Holy Roman Empire (Brockmann, 2006, p. 13), National Socialism made it the “ideological capital” of the Third Reich. For Freddy Raphaël and Geneviève Herberich-Marx, the Nazi regime “deliberately exalted the memory of the great craft and commercial city of the Middle Ages and obliterated the existence of the industrial metropolis” (1988-1989, p.103). Nazism therefore used it to construct its mythology of a glorified past, a heterogeneous imagination marked by the “annexation of antiquity”



1. View of the reception of the footbridge. Documentation Centre on the footbridge that crosses one of the wings of the Congress Hall. Picture: Dominique Trouche



2. The footbridge inside the room.
Picture: Dominique Trouche

(Chapoutot, 2008). For Friederike Hansell, the city had “to create a cultural and spiritual rebirth in Germany” (2008–2009, p. 257) based on two myths: “the Führer myth, viewed to be sent by providence as a national saviour, and the myth of a *Volksgemeinschaft*, a national community founded upon collective uplifting experiences and feelings” (p. 256).

In 1927 and 1929, the Nazi regime held its first two congresses in Nuremberg. They were subsequently cancelled by the city council, but were reinstated in 1933, when Hitler was elected Chancellor. On 15 September 1935, the Nuremberg Laws were promulgated. Albert Speer, Hitler’s architect, drew up a plan for Nuremberg comprising various buildings of imposing proportions and shapes¹. Work

1. On this 11km² site, which includes a lake and a zoo, six main elements were planned: the Luitpold arena, the Zeppelin pitch or stadium, the Champ de Mars, the German stadium, the Grande Rue and the Congress hall.

on the Congress Hall, built by architects Ludwig and Franz Ruff respectively, began in 1935. Shaped like a horseshoe, it was modelled on the Colosseum in Rome. It could accommodate almost 50,000 spectators. Although work was interrupted in 1939, the Congress Hall remains a monumental building measuring 275 by 265 metres and stands 57 meters high.

After the Second World War, the Congress Hall was used as a warehouse. Important discussions took place there and the city officially launched a reflection on this legacy. In the autumn of 1991, the Congress Centre Group recommended the creation of a Nazi Party Congress Site Information Centre to complement the permanent exhibition. The project to build the Documentation Centre in the north wing of the Palace was launched in 1994. It opened on 4 November 2001. Though currently undergoing renovation, its reopening is scheduled for 2025.



3. View from the footbridge on the other side of the Congress Hall. Picture: Dominique Trouche

Domenig's architectural device as mediation

Günther Domenig's architecture is part of the deconstructivist movement. He wanted to break the monotonous architecture of Congress Hall and propose the exact opposite, as Stephen Brockmann reports (2006, p. 273). As an architectural device, the footbridge questions more particularly the shaping of the ideology of National Socialism (Abensour, 2006, p.13).

Rudolf Arnheim talks about the "dynamics of visual perception" of a building (1995, p. 56). The footbridge has a dynamic whose perception is both spatial and temporal. Two modalities of mediation reflect it: transparency and crossing.

Three sides of the footbridge are made of glass: the ceiling and the right and left sides. The glass is transparent, giving a 360° view of a very imposing room that is closed and windowless. For Olivier Aïm, transparency "is a way of writing 'as is'" (2006, p. 34). The architectural device gives immediate and total access to this room, but

the glass also acts as a spatial divider that constrains visitors' movement (Kranzfelder, 2006, p. 147).

The visitors stand both outside and inside. They are invited to look differently, to level their gaze at the historical meaning of this architecture, contributing to its symbolic deconstruction.

The footbridge also involves a crossing. In the shape of an arrow, it pierces the entire left wing of the Congress Hall. Ludwig and Franz Ruff's building therefore appears fallible and destructible. The crossing is to be understood as a passage that invites you to assume a development. This form of mediation also contributes to the implementation of a symbolic deconstruction of the architecture of National Socialism. In this sense, the very characteristic of the footbridge is to induce a moult, a metamorphosis. Yet passages are, as Louis Marin points out, "dangerous places, perhaps because they are not places but spaces of crossing. They can only be identified from what they cannot be, the starting point and the end point" (Louis Marin, quoted by Martin de la Soudière, 2000, p. 11). What the crossing can be is therefore subject to the possibility, as well as the impossibility, of a metamorphosis in the visitor.

Transparency and crossing are combined in the architectural device of the footbridge. These two methods of mediation carry with them constantly confronting dichotomies: included *and* excluded, near *and* far, inside *and* outside, past *and* present. The device therefore invites us to look at and practice two diametrically opposed architectures, possibly inducing reflexivity. Ultimately, transparency and crossing produce a "relationship to": a relationship to the historical legacy of the National Socialist regime and, consequently, to its memorial construction. In this way, the incorporation of the footbridge into the Congress Hall aims to abolish the will to omnipotence and the intention of eternity carried by the architecture of the National Socialist regime.

Bibliography

- Miguel Abensour, *De la Compacité. Architectures et régimes totalitaires, le cas Albert Speer*, Sens et Tonka, 2006.
- Aim Olivier, "La transparence rendue visible. Médiations informatiques de l'écriture" in *Communication et langages*, no. 147, 2006.
- Rudolf Arnheim (1977), *Dynamique de la forme architecturale*, Mardaga, 1995.
- Stephen Brockmann, *Nuremberg: the imaginary capital*, Camden House, 2006.
- Yohann Chapoutot, *Le National-socialisme et l'Antiquité*, PUF, 2008.
- Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré-tout*, Les Éditions de minuit, 2003.
- Friederike Hansell, "Commemorating the Past: The integration of Nazi perpetrator sites into the German memorial landscapes" in *A reader in uncomfortable heritage and dark tourism*, Sam Merrill and Leo Schmidt ed., Research report by the Architectural Conservation Department of the Brandenburgische Technische Universität Cottbus, October 2008/mars 2009.
- Raphaël Freddy, Geneviève Herberich-Marx, "Une ville et les stigmates du passé" in *Revue-des-sciences-sociales*, no. 16, 1988-1989.
- Ivo Kranzfelder, *Eward Hopper : 1882-1987. Vision de la réalité*, Taschen, 2006.
- Louis Marin quoted by Martin de la Soudière, "Le paradigme du passage" in *Communications*, no. 70, 2000.
- Helmut Wehsmann, *Bauen unterm Hakenkreuz. Architektur des Untergangs*, Promedia, 1998.



4. Exterior view, on the other side, of the low-angle footbridge. Picture: Dominique Trouche



5. Interior view of the footbridge. Picture: Dominique Trouche