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HOW THE CHANCELLOR LIVES

A New Regime for an Old Palace

In 1939, as Adolf Hitler contemplated the monumental New Chancellery built by Albert Speer, his mind returned to the Old Chancellery that had been placed at his disposal after he became chancellor, and he shuddered at the horror of it. The two-hundred-year-old former palace at 77 Wilhelm Street, located in the heart of Berlin’s government district, had undergone numerous “tasteless” renovations, according to Hitler, since it had become, following German unification in 1871, the chancellor’s official residence. So-called improvements begun at the end of the nineteenth century, he noted, “steadily disfigured the building with an overwrought grandeur that sought to conceal with its plaster pomposities the lack of honest material and proper proportions.” Even the historic hall in which Otto von Bismarck, Germany’s first chancellor, had hosted the 1878 Congress of Berlin, a summit of major European powers, had not escaped such “embellishments,” which included “awful wall lamps and a gigantic brass chandelier.” Hitler also disparaged the poor quality of the items loaned from the Prussian State Art Collections and the “artistically worthless” portraits of the former chancellors that adorned the walls, with the exception of a portrait of Bismarck by Franz von Lenbach.1

But it was after the German Revolution of 1918, Hitler claimed, that the old palace truly fell apart. By the time the residence was his to occupy, “not only had whole sections of the roof timbers rotted through, but the floors were also completely dilapidated. In the Congress Hall, where diplomatic receptions ought to have taken place, police limited the number of people allowed in the room to sixty at a time in order to minimize the danger of a collapse.” During downpours, Hitler continued, the water penetrated the building from above and below, making it both damp and disgustingly unhygienic. Hitler described how water “gushed” from the street into the ground-floor rooms, where it combined with other “oozing” sources, including the toilets. The smell that filled the house, he recalled, was unbearable.2

Hitler laid the blame for this stinking state of affairs on the Weimar Republic’s turbulent democracy: “Since my predecessors in general could count upon a term of office of only three to five months, they saw no reason to remove the filth of those who had occupied the house before them nor to see to it that those who came after would have better conditions than they themselves. They had no prestige to maintain toward foreign countries since these in any case took little notice of them. As a result the building was in a state of utter neglect.” The extension of the Chancellery with an adjacent office building, located at 78 Wilhelm Street, only made matters worse, in Hitler’s view. The modernist design by the Berlin architect Eduard Jobst Siedler, constructed between 1928 and 1930, “gives the impression from the outside of a warehouse or municipal fire station, and from the inside of a sanatorium for consumptives.” The new building housed the chancellor’s formal office, which Hitler described as “the tasteless room of a sales executive of a mid-sized cigarette and tobacco company.” And yet despite these repellent conditions, Hitler resolved to move into the residence and ordered its complete renovation, which, he emphasized, he had paid for out of his own pocket.3

This extraordinary narrative appeared in the July 1939 issue of the Nazi art journal Die Kunst im Deutschen Reich (Art in the German Reich), which was devoted that month to the New Chancellery. Yet despite the overall celebratory tone of the other contributed essays, a good portion of Hitler’s two-page article consisted of a litany of complaints and critical anecdotes about the Old Chancellery; he did not mention Speer’s name until well into the second page. Even if we admit that, as patron and inhabitant, his perspective on and memory of the project would differ from those of others, nonetheless, on the cusp of talking his nation into war, why did Hitler feel compelled to write about the aesthetic pain caused by ugly light fixtures?

Hitler’s 1939 account of the many renovations and expansions undertaken of the Chancellery demonstrates the ways in which he interwove politics and art. The story he told of putting his house in order was not a parable. For Hitler, rescuing the Old Chancellery from a soulless modernity was an inherently political act, since he believed that the decay of the nation’s artistic consciousness (expressed in the abased house) and its racial and social demise grew from the same roots. The sickening of the Chancellery—which he maintained began during the reign of Kaiser Wilhelm II and intensified under the Weimar Republic—was, in his eyes, part of a larger political and cultural degeneration. In Hitler’s highly ideological worldview, moldering floor boards and a rotting nation were firmly intertwined.

Historians by and large have accepted Hitler’s account of the Old Chancellery, despite Speer having admitted in his memoirs that it was “certainly exaggerated.” Speer nonetheless insisted on the residence’s poor condition, recalling a dark kitchen and outmoded stoves and the need for more bathrooms with updated fixtures. But mostly he emphasized the “bad taste” with which the house had been decorated: for example, “doors painted to imitate natural wood and marble urns for flowers which were actually only marbleized sheet-metal basins.”4 This hardly amounts to a catastrophic situation, and a close look at earlier records reveals that the rot that Hitler claimed to have found in the old house was, in fact, in his head.

In 1875, the Schulenburg Palace (1738–39)—constructed in the Baroque tradition, with a two-story central structure flanked by two projecting wings surrounding a Court of Honor, which formed the official entrance—was purchased by the nation for the chancellor’s official residence. From 1875 to 1878, it underwent an extensive renovation that cost, with furnishings, almost one million Marks. In 1906, the discovery of extensive dry rot and worm damage in the roof construction necessitated replacing almost the entire structure. (Hitler was thus correct about the perilous roof condition, but it had been detected and repaired decades before his arrival—a story that did not serve his purposes to tell.5) Dietmar Arnold’s myth-busting history of the Chancellery pokes further holes in Hitler’s account. He reports that in December 1918, a thorough audit of the building done for the new republican government determined that its overall state was “consistently good.” In the summer of 1926, the chancellor’s private rooms (then in the northern wing) were thoroughly repaired and modernized. There are no records of former residents having made complaints. For almost a year prior to Hitler’s arrival, Paul von Hindenburg had lived at 77 Wilhelm Street while the presidential palace was being renovated. It seems unlikely, Arnold contends, that the German president would have been housed in an unsanitary or unsafe building, where the rain regularly seeped through the roof and the toilets overflowed. Nor did Arnold’s search through the building plans commissioned by Hitler turn up critical repairs.6 In short, there is no proof for the devastating structural damage that Hitler described in his 1939 narrative.

Evidence supporting Hitler’s claim to have financed the work himself is similarly lacking. As a multimillionaire who did not pay taxes, he could well have afforded to take on the burden. A letter dated November 28, 1934, from Gerdy Troost to Albert Speer, who acted as building project manager, mentions her willingness to forgo her fee for the part of the renovation not paid for by the state, while accepting a commission for the rest.7 Troost no doubt made this offer in good faith, believing that Hitler was personally shouldering much of the project’s costs and wanting to spare him further expense. (In a 1971 interview with Hitler biographer John Toland, Troost claimed that she had been far wealthier than Hitler, revealing her political naiveté and ignorance of his tremendous fortune.8) Nonetheless, the Troost Atelier’s own records show that by the end of 1934, of the 172,000 Reichsmarks in invoices submitted for their interior design work, at least 100,000 Reichsmarks had been paid by the Reich Finance Ministry, with indications that this amount was even higher.9 More than half of the tab, and probably most, was thus picked up by German taxpayers—and this at a time when the country was still suffering from the crippling effects of the Depression, with millions of Germans out of work. By contrast, when faced with the severe economic repercussions of the 1929 Wall Street Crash, the republican government had scaled back its plans for furnishing the new office building at 78 Wilhelm Street in order to spare its citizens unnecessary expenditures.10 A few years later, this was a sacrifice that Hitler was unwilling to make. But having presented himself to voters as a simple man with few material wants, he would have been well aware that his refusal to move into the Chancellery on aesthetic grounds—based on an aversion to tacky chandeliers or fake wooden doors—would have destroyed that carefully cultivated image. He thereby pledged to pay for the renovations himself as a seemingly generous and heroic gesture to save the house. Rather than acknowledge any privilege, Hitler treated the move to the Chancellery as yet another burden he assumed for the good of the nation.11

Despite Hitler’s efforts to make it appear otherwise, the renovation of the Old Chancellery thus emerges as a project driven first and foremost by concern for the Führer’s domestic image. This was entrusted to Paul Troost, the Munich-based architect whom Hitler had chosen to give National Socialism its built form (see fig. 36). Hitler initially encountered Troost through his furniture, which he began to collect with his first Mein Kampf royalty checks (or perhaps with help from Elsa and Hugo Bruckmann). Gerdy Troost later wrote that she and her husband first heard Hitler’s name in 1926, when a salesperson from the United Workshops for Art in Handicraft (Vereinigte Werkstätten für Kunst im Handwerk), the Munich firm that produced Paul Troost’s designs, called to ask whether Troost would be willing to sell his personal desk, then on display in the firm’s showroom, to “a Herr Hitler, a politician, who cannot be convinced that the desk is not for sale.” Troost had moved the massive desk to the showroom after he married, to make room for the furniture that his bride had brought with her from Bremen. He planned to retrieve it once they had built themselves a house. Gerdy Troost claimed that since neither she nor her husband bothered with politics at the time, the name only faintly rang a bell. Troost refused to sell, but Hitler persisted to haunt the shop, and the calls continued until finally the architect relented, reasoning that he could always make himself another desk and thus please “this dogged, unknown admirer of his work.”12

But it was not until September 24, 1930, at the Bruckmanns, that Troost and Hitler finally met, at the latter’s request. As art historian Timo Nüsslein points out in his biography of the architect, at the time of their meeting, Troost had erected only some dozen buildings, mostly villas, and was primarily known for his designs for luxury ship interiors, commissions that he had undertaken from 1912 to 1930. More than the houses, it was these ship interiors—impressive, grand spaces outfitted with neoclassical furniture and ornament—that fired Hitler’s imagination. In them, according to Gerdy Troost, Hitler perceived an artistic language that synthesized beauty and function and that drew him more than the work of any other German architect.13 Thus the road to visualizing Nazi architecture began for Hitler from the inside out. Yet Hitler’s attention to interior decoration has been little noted in the scholarship on National Socialist architecture, which has primarily focused on Speer’s monumental works.

Hitler’s first commission to Troost, which was also the first large-scale building project for National Socialism, was the transformation of the nineteenth-century Barlow Palace in Munich into the national headquarters of the Nazi Party, named the Brown House. Beginning in 1930, and in close consultation with Hitler, Troost created and furnished new public rooms for the formerly private residence. These rooms bore the imprint of his earlier designs for the steamship Europa, the interiors of which Hitler especially admired.14 A slew of new party commissions followed rapidly thereafter, culminating in two monumental projects in Munich—the Nazi Party Center at the Königsplatz and the House of German Art—which after 1933 would establish Troost’s severe neoclassicism as the look of the new regime.

Sometime in the summer of 1933, Hitler commissioned Troost to remodel and refurnish the Old Chancellery in Berlin. Later that fall, Hitler considered building a new house in the park behind the Chancellery, but realized that occupying the historic structure was symbolically the more powerful move.15 According to Hans Frank, Hitler had already talked about making changes the night that he was sworn in as chancellor, but the work had to wait until Hindenburg had returned to his presidential palace later that spring.16 In the meantime, in February 1933, Hitler moved out of his former Berlin headquarters at the Kaiserhof Hotel, located across the street from the Chancellery, and into the spacious, ten-room secretary of state’s apartment on the fourth floor of the Siedler office building.17 Over the next few months, he focused on consolidating his power, issuing the Reichstag Fire Decree, which abolished most civil liberties; passing the Enabling Act, which permitted him to enact laws without parliament; setting up the Gestapo; and abolishing trade unions as well as political parties except for his own.

In the fall of 1933, Troost fell ill and was hospitalized for six weeks. In December, he was released and resumed work, but in January, his health worsened, and he died on January 21, 1934, at the age of fifty-five.18 His National Socialist projects, many of them barely begun, were left in limbo, and Speer later claimed that Hitler, in a panic, considered taking over the architecture firm himself in order to see them completed.19 Instead, this responsibility was assumed by the architect’s twenty-nine-year-old wife, Gerdy Troost, and his forty-nine-year-old studio assistant, Leonhard Gall. Both had years of experience working alongside Paul Troost, although in different capacities. In the renamed Atelier Troost, which in 1934 had twenty employees, Gall became studio head and employed his architectural and technical skills on building sites and at the drafting board.20 Gerdy Troost assumed the role of office manager, handling correspondence, finances, publicity, and client relations. She also took on a greater role in the firm’s interior design projects. In a postwar interview, she described her responsibilities as choosing colors and materials, consulting with Gall on furniture designs, arranging the rooms, and decorating them with tapestries and other artwork.21 A 1939 article on the Führer’s architects in the lifestyle magazine die neue linie (the new line) gave her primary design credit for the interiors of numerous Third Reich projects, including the Old Chancellery.22

Because of his illness and the demands of his other building commissions, it is not clear how far Troost had progressed in his designs for the Chancellery before his death. Invoices show that he had received estimates for furniture orders as early as August 1933.23 A few drawings from his hand survive, including an elevation of the dining room dated December 1933.24 Whatever work remained in reimagining and remodeling the residence fell to the Atelier Troost and was carried out from January to May 1934. As Hitler described it in his 1939 article, the renovation had two interrelated objectives: concentrating the public living spaces and reception rooms on the ground floor, and arranging the upper story to serve the private and practical needs of the chancellor.25 Previous chancellors had entertained in the reception rooms on the upper floor, a vestige of the piano nobile. The 1934 reorganization created a private apartment for Hitler on the northern side of the main building’s second floor (fig. 4). The Congress Hall, which was rarely used, separated this domestic space from offices on the southern side. During the Imperial and Weimar eras, the chancellor’s private rooms had been located on the second floor of the projecting northern wing.26 This area was now reserved for Hitler’s adjutants, providing easy access from the chancellor’s private apartment. The southern wing contained further offices, service areas, and guest rooms (Speer undertook renovations here as well as in the adjacent Siedler building).27 The result was an expanded private realm for work and personal life in the upper story that was isolated from the lower public rooms.

But much more than functionality was at stake for Hitler in the redesign. In criticizing the (supposed) deterioration of the Old Chancellery during the Weimar Republic, Hitler had equated the house’s shabbiness with the country’s loss of foreign prestige. He thus revealed his belief that an impressive house was a political exigency of his new regime. In an August 1938 speech given at the topping-out ceremony for the New Chancellery, he claimed that he had commissioned Speer’s building in order to give Germany an image that was as good as or better than that of other nations. He further explained that this desire was divorced from personal vanity, distinguishing between the modesty of the home he occupied as a private citizen in Munich and the representational demands of his seat as chancellor and Führer.28

For Hitler, an image worthy of the Führer and the German nation not only required grandeur, but it also needed to be of its own time. In the same 1938 speech, he criticized revolutionary governments that took office in former castles, such as the Kremlin, and insisted that he himself refused to enter them (conveniently forgetting that the Chancellery had once been, if not a castle, at least a palace).29 This aversion to historical associations not of his own choosing may well have been the primary motivating factor for the renovation of the Old Chancellery. Photographs from 1932 reveal that the building had been furnished in a style that preserved a historical tone. This, more than any structural flaws, may have suggested to Hitler the building’s decrepitude. Occupying a former palace was problematic enough, but residing in one that looked old and stuffy threatened the dynamic image that Hitler wished to convey. In the 1932 presidential election, Hitler had taken to the air—a then-unprecedented campaign tactic—to establish his youthful modernity in contrast to the elderly Hindenburg. A comparison of images taken before and after the Chancellery renovation makes clear the effort to modernize its spaces (figs. 5, 6).30 At the same time, this was decidedly not the modernity of the International Style of the previous decade, which Hitler rejected as worthy only of sanatoriums and fire stations. Thus, for the Atelier Troost, the challenge was to create, within the framework of a former palace, a grand and impressive image of the Führer that recalled neither the pompous regality of dead monarchs nor the “tasteless” newness of the tobacco sales executive.

Ridding the interiors of their dated appearance began with an opening of spaces to light and air. On the ground floor, the largest room facing the garden had been partitioned in the Weimar era to create offices, which were desperately needed as the administration of the Chancellery grew in this period. The construction of the Siedler office building in 1930 freed up this formerly residential space, and the old partitions were removed in the 1934 renovation (fig. 7).31 Additionally, a load-bearing wall was eliminated to join two rooms, which necessitated the replacement of the Congress Hall’s timber floor above with a stronger steel-girder construction.32 The resulting open, bi-level hall became the main space for receptions (fig. 8).

The length of the hall created a dramatic interior vista, which would become a hallmark of Hitler’s spaces at the expanded Berghof and New Chancellery. An oversized Persian-patterned carpet that climbed the stairs emphasized the sweeping expanse of the room while also unifying the two levels. (Hitler liked to tell the story that this luxurious carpet originally had been ordered by the League of Nations for its new Geneva headquarters, but when it was completed, the league was short of funds and could not pay, so he acquired it for his official residence. He thus presented himself, no doubt with mocking reference to having withdrawn Germany from the league in October 1933, as literally pulling the carpet out from under them.33) The perspectival lines of the carpet led the eye to the large Gobelin tapestry hanging on the far wall. Such tapestries, three of which hung in this room, similarly became distinctive of Hitler’s spaces, both domestic and official. Paul Troost had used tapestries in his Europa interior, and these would also feature prominently in his National Socialist buildings in Munich. Their richness and scale worked well in large rooms, and Hitler appreciated their narrative qualities; he often chose tapestries with triumphal mythic or historic scenes.34 While decoration of this sort would seem to counteract the desire to update the rooms, other elements, such as the off-white walls, crisp rectilinear forms, and abundant light from the large windows facing the park conveyed a more contemporary feel. British journalist George Ward Price, reporting on the first formal dinner party with invited foreign guests hosted there on December 19, 1934, wrote appreciatively of the modern sensibility.35 Although not visible, the room also contained state-of-the-art entertainment technology, with a hidden movie projector and screen as well as a radio cabinet. Hitler would often gather here informally with guests in the evenings to watch films, a practice he would continue at the Berghof.36

Decluttering the rooms and removing much of the historic ornament also served to update the look of the interiors. In some cases, as in the foyer leading to the Reception Hall, this verged on an emptiness that design historian Sonja Günther argues was meant to intimidate (fig. 9). She characterizes the impression made by the spare furniture and stone floor in the capacious room as cold and museal, despite the presence of a large red carpet. One could argue, however, that the removal of four large Doric columns and the lowering of the ceiling made the space considerably more hospitable (and less pompous) after its renovation.37 Whether or not the foyer unnerved its occupants, it certainly held few distractions to divert their attention from the act of waiting. Speer would later pick up and exaggerate these elements in the experience of anxiety and powerlessness that he designed for visitors to the New Chancellery.

In other ground-floor rooms, Günther sees the desire for aristocratic grandeur and the habits of middle-class domesticity warring with one another. She points to the incongruity of rooms with noble proportions and crystal chandeliers decorated with fussy, overstuffed sitting corners meant to convey Gemütlichkeit or with mantelpieces and display cabinets filled with porcelain figurines and vases, a showcasing of affluence and taste typical of the nouveau-riche bourgeois home.38 But what Günther interprets as a fissure in Hitler’s decorating psychology equally could be interpreted as confidence that he could occupy both identities at the same time—grand yet homey, a world leader yet an average Joe. The apparent disjointedness at the level of design may not have bothered a client like Hitler, who believed that he himself was the integrating factor.

At the same time, and as suggested by his asserted refusal to enter castles, Hitler did not wish to appear to be putting on aristocratic airs. The building at 77 Wilhelm Street was closely associated in the German imagination with Bismarck, who enjoyed cult status among the right. Despite Bismarck’s noble ancestry, the soldierly simplicity of his lifestyle, including at the Chancellery, was much admired, especially when weighed against his stature as a statesman. Hitler’s criticism of the residence’s despoliation around the turn of the twentieth century was directed in large measure at Duke Bernhard von Bülow, who was chancellor from 1900 to 1909. The lavish renovation of the Chancellery undertaken by Bülow and his wife, an Italian princess, sought to evoke courtly associations and led to it being dubbed the Doge’s Palace on the Spree. Hitler’s commitment to his image as a simple, even poor, man necessitated avoiding the luxuriance with which Bülow had come to be associated. Gerdy Troost claimed that she had designed in the “English style of living,” by which she referred to earlier British-inspired design reform movements in Germany that had valued the quality of materials and craftsmanship over showy display. Even so, and despite his criticism, Hitler seemed to appreciate the aristocratic splendor of some of the Bülow-era decoration. In particular, the striking pine ceilings installed in some rooms by the Bülows in imitation of Italian Renaissance palaces were not only maintained by Hitler but may have inspired the ceiling of the Great Hall of the Berghof (fig. 10 and see plate 4).39 Thus, the conflicting class associations that Günther detects in the 1934 renovation may also be explained by Hitler being drawn to and yet needing to reject a grandeur that would have hurt his public image.

The dining room designed by Paul Troost similarly reinforced Hitler’s vision of himself and his party (fig. 11). Since Hitler found the existing dining room too small, he commissioned a large addition that extended into the park at the back of the house. Speer later described the feeling of this room, with its ivory walls and three glass doors leading on to the park, as one of “openness and brightness.” The neoclassical symmetry and ornament, typical of Troost’s designs, evoked the ancient Greek heritage that Hitler claimed for his imagined Aryan nation. Standing in niches on marble pedestals, two large bronze statues by Munich sculptor Joseph Wackerle represented Earth (female) and Volk (male). At the front of the room hung a large classical allegory, The Triumph of Music, by Friedrich August von Kaulbach, which had been painted in 1919 for the music room of a Munich villa. Art historian Birgit Schwarz maintains that the room had been conceived, from the layout facing the garden to the male and female statuary in niches and the central round table, to recall the Marble Hall of Frederick the Great’s summer palace at Sanssouci, where the Prussian king, one of Hitler’s idols, had hosted a roundtable with diplomats, officers, writers, and philosophers that was famous for its intellectual brilliance and freedom.40 Yet despite such culturally refined associations, the atmosphere at table was altogether different. Hitler jokingly called the dining room the Merry Chancellor’s Restaurant, but Speer found the company, typically consisting of party politicians with little education or worldly experience and too timid to speak their minds, dull beyond measure.41

The dining room’s seating arrangement buttressed another party legend: a united Volk community. Although Hitler always sat at the large table in the center of the room, its round form suggested equality and the Führer’s modesty. “The chairs were all alike,” Speer later wrote, “the host’s no more elaborate than the rest.”42 But such appearances barely concealed deeply entrenched power hierarchies. To begin, those invited to table were almost all men.43 And as Reinhard Spitzy, Joachim von Ribbentrop’s private secretary, recalled in his memoirs, when the moment came to enter the dining room, electricity passed through the assembled guests as Hitler prepared to announce the selection of his tablemates: “All paladins stood immediately on tiptoe and puffed themselves up as large and wide as possible, so that the prince’s eye would chance to fall on them. Hitler visibly enjoyed this situation and took his time. ‘Let’s see,’ he said, ‘I would like on my right’—pause—‘Dr. Goebbels, please; to my left, Herr von Ribbentrop; the next right, General X, please; and next left, Gauleiter Y. The remaining gentlemen please seat yourselves as you wish.’” As Spitzy asserts, this ritual was highly politicized, establishing the diners’ status.44 Those not among the main table elect sat at smaller tables around the room. Adjacent to the dining room, on its western side, was a sunny, comfortable winter garden where breakfast was served. Günther writes that “the abundance of plants, the large carpet with its profusion of mythical scenes, the armchair upholstery patterned after the Wiener Werkstätte, and the red-lacquered furniture gave this room a certain freshness that was unusual for the Third Reich.”45

Perhaps the excitement felt by guests as they were about to enter the dining room also had to do with the anticipation of finally eating, since Hitler often left them gathered in the comfortable Smoking Room adjacent to the dining room (see fig. 10), waiting for hours as he lingered in his new private apartment on the second floor.46 This apartment consisted of a private study, library, bedroom, dressing room (later guest room), and large outdoor roof terrace built on top of the dining room (see fig. 4). After dinner, guests were occasionally served coffee and liqueurs on the terrace, from which they enjoyed views of the treetops in the Chancellery park.47

Hitler’s study was uncluttered and the furniture was arranged for solitary work (fig. 12). The artwork on the walls served more than a decorative function. Near his desk, Hitler hung an engraving of the House of German Art by Paul Troost as well as portraits of Bismarck, Frederick the Great, and Dietrich Eckart, figures with whom he identified politically or intellectually. As Schwarz has demonstrated in her study of Hitler and art, the dictator created carefully controlled narratives about himself through the paintings he displayed in his work and living spaces.48 Historian Timothy Ryback has found a similar identification process in the books that Hitler collected.49

Surprisingly, the latter were not on view in Hitler’s library (see fig. 6). This large room, which also functioned as his parlor, contained a fireplace around which a sofa and chairs had been arranged, a timber ceiling, a massive table designed by Paul Troost in 1933 that would become a feature of Hitler’s work spaces, and book cabinets with glass doors covered by curtains, which had replaced previously open shelves. Günther speculates that there were no books behind the curtains, and that the obscured shelves suggested learning that the occupant did not possess.50 Friedelind Wagner, Richard Wagner’s granddaughter, who visited Hitler at the Chancellery shortly after the renovation, claimed that Hitler had had curtains installed because the books’ different sizes and colors disturbed him.51 Given the open bookcases in his Obersalzberg and Munich libraries, this seems unlikely. If the book collection belonged to the Chancellery rather than to him, it may be that he did not want to look at or be associated with other chancellors’ books. Whatever the case may be, the new cabinets, with their simplified forms, gave the already rich room a visually more restful and uniform appearance. The removal of excess decoration and massive doorframes, along with the substitution of a plain floor covering for the earlier floral carpeting, also gave the library a more contemporary feel.

Wagner described Hitler’s bedroom, of which there are no known photographs, as exceptionally simple: it “looked more like that of a governess than a dictator.” She recalled a cast-iron bed, table, nightstand, and simple wooden chair, all painted white, and nothing else, except for an oil painting of his mother. The floor plan of the room by the Atelier Troost indicates somewhat more furniture than this.52 The plainness of Hitler’s bedrooms has often been commented on, both then and now, and taken as proof of the unaffectedness and modesty of the private man, the “real” Hitler. The designs for his residences do suggest that he preferred simple bedrooms. However, these must be placed in the larger context of the elaborate residences in which they were found, which speaks no less to Hitler’s identity and tastes. Connected to Hitler’s bedroom was a sizable dressing room. In a later renovation, he ordered its conversion into a private bedroom, sitting room, and bath for Eva Braun, thus literally keeping her in his closet.53

Renovations in other parts of the building continued after Hitler moved into his new quarters in May 1934.54 The Congress Hall, adjacent to Hitler’s private study, was transformed into the Cabinet Room, but was little modified apart from the addition of furniture designed by Paul Troost (fig. 13). The eagle and swastika upholstered on the back of the chairs, the swastikas on the table runner, and the massiveness of the walnut table itself, which measured six and a half feet in width by thirty-three feet in length, clearly marked the room as a place of Nazi power.55 It was an expensive ideological statement, with the embroidered upholstery for the thirty chairs alone costing nearly 10,000 Reichsmarks.56 The lighting fixtures that Hitler so disparaged in his 1939 speech remained unchanged, reinforcing the purely rhetorical and political nature of those comments. Hitler met collectively with his ministers in the Cabinet Room until 1938, after which he gave up the pretense of any regular government procedure. The furnishings were moved to the New Chancellery in 1939 and the empty space was used to display Hitler’s birthday presents. The room again assumed a political function with the start of the war, serving for Hitler’s military briefings with his generals.57

In the spring of 1935, the Atelier Troost furnished Hitler’s formal office.58 Having rejected the chancellor’s office in the Siedler extension as better suited to a corporate sales executive, Hitler had a large reception hall on the second floor of the same building, formerly known as the Red Room, converted for his use. Located directly adjacent to the Old Chancellery and connected through a suite of rooms, the new office was easily accessible from his private apartment. With gleaming Art Deco features, dating from 1930, the room had the impressive scale and drama that he demanded. This was reinforced by the dimensions of the relatively spare furnishings, such as the length of the inlaid sideboard behind Hitler’s desk or the desk itself, which was designed by Troost in 1933 (fig. 14).59 Despite his complaints about the quality of the state-loaned artwork, Hitler retained the sixteenth-century Italian paintings that had formerly hung in the room, including the large Enthroned Madonna and Child with Saints by the Venetian artist Francesco Vecellio, which Günther points out gave the room a sacral air. By moving to this room, Hitler symbolically left behind the Weimar-era office of the chancellor—its smallness evoking “the confinement of bureaucratic rules and regulations”—to enter an expansive space of his own making, a stage that would permit, in his view, an unencumbered performance of his political genius.60 In the New Chancellery office designed by Speer, these grandiose tendencies, beginning to unfold in the Troost renovation, would reach absurd proportions. Both versions of Hitler’s formal office functioned as ceremonial and ideological spaces, and he rarely actually worked in them.61

Renovations in the Old Chancellery, including the offices of Hitler’s adjutants and the area south of the Cabinet Room, continued through 1935 and into early 1936.62 This period also witnessed the erection of a large-scale building extension by the Atelier Troost. With the death of President Hindenburg in August 1934, Hitler assumed his powers, becoming not only chancellor, but also president and head of the army. Hitler marked his expanded influence architecturally by commissioning Gall to design a Reception Building where 250 people could dine and diplomatic and state gatherings take place. The structure, completed in the spring of 1936, was built on the grounds of the park (extending into the lot belonging to the adjacent Foreign Office) and was joined to the Chancellery by a new and larger glassed-in Winter Garden that replaced the modest room that had once stood beside the dining room.63 The interior of the new Reception Building, a collaboration between Gall and Gerdy Troost, featured massive brown marble columns, a ceiling ornamented with swastika mosaics, and tall bronze wall lamps with eagle and swastika that recalled Roman standards, among other decoration—which, as art historian Angela Schönberger has argued, visually reinforced the unity, following Hindenburg’s death, of party and state.64 The atmosphere was far grander and more formal than the old Reception Hall, which, by comparison, was domestic in scale and look. At the same time that the new Reception Building was built, an air raid shelter was constructed beneath it, which would later be integrated into the larger Führer bunker.65

The building of a vast New Chancellery, which Hitler justified as fulfilling the representational and functional needs created by the territorial expansion of the Greater German Reich in 1938 (even though, as historians have pointed out, its planning began years earlier), provided a surplus of new spaces.66 Nonetheless, Hitler continued to live and work in the Old Chancellery, and his closest staff remained there as well, finding it more convenient to be near him than to relocate to Speer’s building, which “proved too far away.”67 In 1944, a bomb fell on the Cabinet Room, but other parts of the residence remained intact and continued to be used. Not long after American bombers destroyed much of the rest on February 3, 1945, including the Merry Chancellor’s Restaurant, Hitler moved permanently into the bunker.68 In her memoirs, Traudl Junge, Hitler’s secretary, recalls that by the war’s end, the valuable objects in the Old Chancellery had been replaced with less-costly furnishings.69 If the art and furniture survived the war, their whereabouts today remain unknown.