

Architecture

Passport To Power

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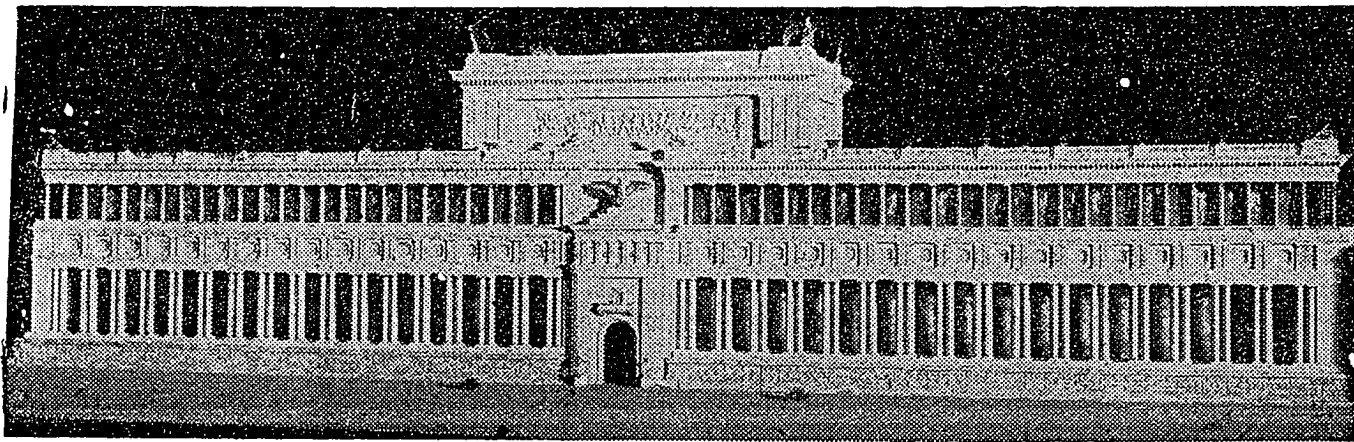
ONE of the most frightening and repellent documents of modern history is high on the best-seller list this fall: Albert Speer's memoirs, "Inside the Third Reich." Concurrently, a small show of architectural sketches from Hitler's own hand and photographs of Speer's models based on some of the drawings are on display at the New York Cultural Center at Columbus Circle through Nov. 8. Reading the book and looking at the show adds up to a pretty depressing experience.

The impression received from reviews of the book is that Albert Speer was incidentally an architect who rose to the critical position of minister of armaments under Hitler during World War II. Discussion has revolved chiefly around whether the book's tone of artful honesty about moral failure doesn't really prove that Speer is an intelligent, believable, reasonably humane and quite nice guy who has served his time and repented in full. After all, he was kind to slave laborers. And he is a gentleman, with an attractive and sensitive face. (If you were to meet the devil tomorrow, he would be a charming fellow.)

What has been skirted for observations on politics and power is the fact that this is a book about architecture and corruption, and that the two here are inseparable from politics and power. The conclusion must be that this is a classic tale of corruption, both of the man, and of the art of architecture.

Architecture was not merely a mutual side interest of Adolf Hitler and Albert Speer. It was the catalytic element and shared passion—and direct route to power for Speer—on which much of the nightmare of the Third Reich was built. One third of the book is devoted to it.

To call Speer a gifted architect who fell under Hitler's satanic spell is poppycock. He was not gifted. As an architect, he was mediocre at best.



Model of Albert Speer's project for Hitler's palace in Berlin

How to succeed in the Third Reich by being third-rate

The poverty of his architectural vision was matched only by Hitler's, who, incidentally, was quite capable of good criticism of a bad design.

His taste was better than Hitler's, and he knew it. A cultivated member of the upper middle class he was quick to note Hitler's acceptance of kitsch. Speer's sniff on entering Hitler's quarters for the first time is still audible. "I was admitted to an anteroom containing mementos or presents of low quality. The furniture, too, testified to poor taste." Birthday gifts from Gauleiters whose crudity appalled him stressed such things as marble replicas of the boy removing a thorn from his foot—bourgeois taste in its most pejorative sense.

How, then, to explain his role as Hitler's draftsman, frequently serving only to turn a 10-year-old Hitler sketch into a gigantic model and working drawings signed xxx, an "anonymous" clearly understood to be Hitler himself?

This kind of service is as old as the love of power in high places. The first requisite is a weak talent, with no strong personal convictions to be sacrificed. The second is ambition, which carries with it the seeds of self-delusion. Mediocrity is the passport to corruptibility.

It is important to note that Speer was an architecture student in the Berlin of Der Ring—that post-World War I group of brilliant, revolutionary modernist architects that included Mies, Gropius, Mendelsohn, Scharoun, Taut, Behrens and Poelzig, most of whom were to be censured as "decadent" by the Hitler regime. It was a time of high intellectual and creative fer-

ment. Speer was part of none of it. He tells us that he did not draw well enough to be accepted in Poelzig's seminar.

Significantly, Speer made his mark first by designing Nazi rallies—those choreographed, theatrical specialties that became chillingly effective spectacles of manipulated mass psychology. His master stroke, for the famous Nuremberg rally, was the programmed play of 130 anti-aircraft searchlights, their powerful beams 40 feet apart, visible at a height of 25,000 feet. "It was like a cathedral of ice," observed an awed Sir Neville Henderson.

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"I was looking for an architect to whom I could entrust my building plans," said Hitler. "For the commission to do a great building," said Speer, "I would have sold my soul, like Faust."

He did. His close relationship with Hitler centered increasingly on the grandiose architectural plans that absorbed them both. He closed his eyes to the enormities around him. "I was on the way, I thought at the time, to creating a body of work that would place me among the most famous architects of history."

History is irony. Of the vast rebuilding schemes for Berlin, Nuremberg, Munich and Linz, only one top project, the Berlin Chancellery, was ever completed, and that was destroyed by bombs. The Speer style was a self-cancelling blend of ostentatious display and total sterility of the neoclassical wedding-cake school. It suited Hitler well. In the sphere of architecture, Speer remarks, as in painting and sculpture, "Hitler remained arrested in the world of his youth: the world of

1890 to 1910, which stamped its imprint on his artistic taste as well as his political and ideological conceptions."

It would be false to say that neoclassicism is a totalitarian product; it is not. But a curiously consistent overblown, retardataire variety of the genre seems to appear under totalitarian sponsorship. "I had spells of uneasiness concerned mainly with the direction I was taking as an architect," says Speer. He knew, of course, what genuine classicism was, with such examples as Schinkel before him. What he was dealing in was a *parvenu* vulgarity in which column count substitutes for art. The forms are familiar, but you can't quite place the face. As a kind of architecture of the absurd, it is not without a morbid fascination.

The Nuremberg streetcar depot was blown up for the Nuremberg stadium—modeled after the Altar of Pergamon and never built—and the wreckage inspired Speer's "theory of ruin value." All of his structures were to be designed to be seen as magnificent ruins after thousands of years of proclaiming the glories of the Hitler Reich. He began to deal in dimensions that dwarfed the pyramid of Cheops, shadowed the palaces of Darius and Xerxes in Persopolis, doubled the size of the Circus Maximus in Rome.

The focus of the nightmare was the "grand avenue" for Berlin. A 130-foot-wide street was to be cut through three miles of the center city, marked at its start and finish by two monstrous monuments. One was an 825-foot-diameter domed hall to hold 150,000 people, with an interior 16 times the volume of St. Peter's. The other was a 500-

foot-wide 386-foot-high triumphal arch into which the Arc de Triomphe in Paris would have fitted 49 times. The design for Hitler's palace was nonstop stylography; Goering was to wallow in redundant arcades and useless ceremonial stairs. The ultimate effect, as Speer developed Hitler's surprisingly small and delicate sketches into models, is of ballooning banality. Megalomania can be a crashing bore.

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Speer does not spare self-criticism today. "A blatant nouveau riche architecture of prestige," he calls his work. Interiors and furnishings were in "ocean liner style." Of the grand avenue scheme reviewed now, he says, "I was struck by the resemblance to a Cecil B. DeMille set. I also became aware of the cruel element in this architecture. It has been the very expression of a tyranny. It has become pure 'art of decadence.'"

This is too flattering. Decadence is much more interesting. Nor can it be compared, as is so often done, with the late 18th, early 19th century neoclassical gigantism of Ledoux and Boulée in France, who designed projects of surreal scale and splendor. That was a genuine architecture of fantasy.

There is no fantasy here. It is all flat feet. When Vlamminck, Derain and Despiou visited Berlin they looked at Speer's models in dead silence. Nine years as chief designer of monuments for the Third Reich had brought him to a position of uncontested authority, second only to Hitler. Never underestimate the power of an architect.