



INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Interview with Historian Dr. Alexander Schmidt – English Translation

*Interview by Isabelle Diener (ID) and Denise Heinz (DH)
featuring Dr. Alexander Schmidt (AS)*

ENGLISH TRANSCRIPT (TRANSLATION):

ID:

We would like to ask you to introduce yourself, your name, your profession and, of course, we are particularly interested in where you work.

AS:

My name is Alexander Schmidt from Nuremberg. I work at the Documentation Center at the Nazi Party Rally Grounds and I have known this site from the Nazi era for a relatively long time, I already offered tours here as a student and played here as a child. So, a long history with a Nazi-infested area, one could say.

DH:

Thank you! Over the course of our seminar and our work, we have dealt a lot with the architecture [of this site]. We would like to ask in general, are there any very typical elements, that can not only be found in Nuremberg, but also overall [in Nazi architecture]?

AS:

Yes, there are some. Here in Nuremberg, we only have a segment of building under National Socialism, namely these state representative buildings. There are also gas stations and housing estates in the Heimatschutzstyle, even modern industry buildings from the Nazi era, but what can be found here [at the Nazi Party Rally Grounds] is mainly this monumental architecture. It has several elements, that can be found in Munich, in Berlin, almost everywhere. The first impression: It looks a bit ancient. If you know a little bit more about art history, you may be reminded of Prussian building traditions. It somehow seems so old and dignified. It is mostly columns, massive windows, big staircases, symmetries. Concerning the materials, the most striking thing, it is striking as a child already, many natural stone. In the Congress Hall, where I am working right now, it is granite. At the Zeppelin Tribune, another part of the Nazi Party Rally Grounds, it is shell limestone. So, it is always a lot of natural stone and the first impression is always very heavy and big and mighty. That can definitely be seen parallel to the Königsplatz in Munich and other areas of that period, that is typical. That can be seen again and again.

DH:

I often came across the term neoclassicism when researching. Do you have a short explanation of that term and could you classify it?

AS:

Yes, Albert Speer and his ilk, that is a little interchangeable. So, if you take a look at the buildings along the east-west-axis or the north-south-axis, you can not even tell, which architect that was. It all looks



relatively similar. Neoclassicism simply means it is based on classical antiquity. It is not really important, whether it is Greece, the Pergamon Altar, Zeppelin Tribune or Rome, Congress Hall or Colosseum in Rome. That is arbitrary, that is not really stringent or a conscious orientation towards tradition. Rather, we take something and create something of our own. You could almost say, it is a collage principle. You can arbitrarily take anything, recombine it and you have a Nazi monumental building. That is, what is meant by Neoclassicism. Of course, you also want to elevate yourself. You put yourself in the tradition of a mister Schinkel, the Prussians for instance. Speer wants to be taken seriously as an architect. That means, he travels, for example with his assistant Rudolf Wolters, to Greece and Rome. They took a look and tried to gather some inspiration and claimed, what I would not let them get away with, that they really build something in that tradition. I do not think that Speer is a creative architect. He was more of an epigonal architect. He probably would not like to hear that. He is a good organizer, but looked at from an art historic and architectural historic perspective, that is nothing special. At best, it's copying certain traditions in a relatively primitive form.

DH:

Thank you!

ID:

Before, we talked about certain building elements, for instance big windows, columns, the sheer size of those buildings. I mean, everybody who has visited the Nazi Party Rally Grounds before, knows, of course, that those are enormous buildings. Could you explain briefly, why those exact elements were used?

AS: There are multiple reasons, of course you want to place yourself in that tradition and therefore demonstrate that you are standing in the tradition of those empires. Hitler once said, at the laying of foundation of the Congress Hall, that this hall shall bear witness to the greatness of the Third Reich. So, the imaginary, when we walk at the ruins of the Acropolis or the Forum Romanum today, we feel history as well. This feeling should arise there too. Albert Speer also claims that he constructed those buildings according to a so-called ruin-value-theory. That is an invention after the Second World War, to once again elevate yourself, to make yourself more important than you truly are in architectural history. But these classic elements they used, had the purpose of widely conveying the importance of the state, beyond speeches and proclamations and writing and text. So, these "words made of stone", as Hitler once called buildings, a word made from stone, that is supposed to look a certain way. One could say, it is propaganda for the state through building. So, as great as these buildings are, is the state as well. That works through size amongst other, but that also works through materials. Granite expresses some different value, as it lies there, than something delicate, a narrow glass facade with very narrow steel elements, like Bauhaus does it. This is a contrasting program. All that is supposed to, apart from intellect, appeal to emotions. I think you can understand that, when walking towards those giant buildings, that the effect is not arbitrary, but there is a reason behind it.

DH:

I think you feel very small when standing in front of it.

AS:

You feel small. On the other hand, when you are inside of this complex "zeppelin field", for instance, you are also part of something big. That always has these two sides. On my tours, I always used that saying: "You are nothing, your people are everything." That is expressed a little bit in those buildings there. As a single person, you do not really matter there. You are relatively lost in front of those buildings. But as a block, as a large group of people, you have a purpose. Also as decoration. Another historian once spoke of the ornamentation of the masses. That means, that these buildings take into account the people who are in



front and inside of them, gathering, lining up. That is taken into account. So far these are... some said these are “crazy” buildings. Speer as well, in his memories, dismissed them as such. That is not right. Those are cleverly constructed buildings, that have the purpose of a structured propaganda. That is why they are still something, that’s worth visiting today, because they express those former thoughts.

DH:

I couldn’t have said it better.

AS: Thanks!

ID:

You already told us, that you were playing there as a child and offered tours as a student and now you are working on the site. What effects did that have over the years, the architecture as well as the Nazi Party Rally Grounds in general, on you personally?

AS:

It’s not that I had it as a live goal to be here on the site. That was more of a coincidence. But I remember it pretty well. As a child, and it is the case for all children of Nuremberg or children in that area, next door is the funfair. They set up the Ferris wheel and then you ride the Ferris wheel with your grandma as a child. And then you go up and there’s this weird building of the Congress Hall, that you see. Then you ask of course: “What’s that?”. As a child you find that striking, that’s not how every building looks in the city you live in and then you ask: “What’s that?”. My grandma then replied: “That’s a Colosseum”. She didn’t really like to talk about that. An answer I thought a lot about later on. Why did she say, that it was a Colosseum? As a child I never questioned that. As a child those are simply big houses you can walk around at, where you go for an afternoon walk. This is our recreational area here at Dutzendteich. That’s an urban area. That also distinguishes these grounds from a memorial site, for example. It’s never closed, so to speak, it’s always open. Everybody can play football here, you can sit here, there are car races, rock concerts. So it’s, so to speak, an urban area that is used. And in-between this use, those buildings stand out. Of course, when you know more later on, those images seem suspicious or weird. It’s bizarre, when you see picture, for instance of a haunted house in front of the Congress Hall, a giant gorilla and the Congress Hall in the background. Perhaps a poet could write nicely about that. At the Zeppelin Tribune too, you notice at some point that the place prominent place right in the middle is something special. When you know that Hitler was actually standing there, giving speeches and now I can stand there as well. That is a challenge for us, as a city, we have to pay attention: “What’s happening there”, “Is it alright the way it’s going?”. I would say, it is, but that’s not given. We haven’t become a place of pilgrimage for Nazis, we could become one at any time, if the circumstances change. On the other hand, it is interesting to ask yourself why the effect of the buildings is given, but they are not used by right-wing extremists. That is because they don’t fill the buildings. It’s simply too big. If a hundred people show up, that seems pathetic. They would have to bring 20.000, or 100.000. Fortunately, the numbers are not so high in the right-wing extremist movement, that they could fill those spaces. But the impact is given, I believe that. On a day-to-day basis it is a bit superimposed, sometimes it’s more prominent, sometimes less. That means we, as a city... it is a beautiful result that these buildings can be in everyday life and don’t fulfil their negative effect the way the Nazis intended. But you have to fight for that again and again.

DH:

Over the course of our work, we concentrated particularly on the effect of those buildings and what they should express and how that really affected the civilians in the end. Do you think that Hitler and Speer



achieved their goals with these buildings or...? Because I personally would say, those monumental structures, just like you explained that earlier, this sense of togetherness, standing in the thousands, in an enclosed space: “The Führer in front of us, we in front of him”...that it has been quite reached.

AS:

I would say so. IF I said earlier that they are not crazy buildings, like Speer is writing in his memory, megalomaniac, mad, but they are cleverly thought-out buildings, then the Zeppelin Field is the only finished building, that's still standing today. Those building worked and it's incredibly hard to tell, how did the people back then really react to the Nazi Party Rallies? But what you can say, I think, based on the sources, journals, reports, that at least part of the people really had a positive, impressive experience in Nuremberg. That is partially self-reinforcing. The propaganda says how great it was. Partly, they write exactly that in their postcards. We have the diary of a little boy from a pub near Nuremberg. If you're reading that, you're thinking, he's copying the propaganda, but I think, he overhears it and he also feels like that himself. That means, in my opinion, that there was an effect, created by the architecture. That includes, of course, the lighting, the music, the colors, the whole sound, that the Party Rallies had. That was something that could inspire people. You have to say too, that you didn't have to convince most visitors. They already came to Nuremberg as National Socialists. But you motivated them again, that was an intention of those conferences, to keep them in line, to convey the whole meaning and importance of the “movement”, as you called it back then. And the architecture is a framework for that. Sure, a very recent paper describes those spaces as “utopic spaces”. That means, the National Socialism translated its vision of a national community into architecture. That means, you felt to a certain extend: “I am part of something”. Almost ideally at the Zeppelin Field. It seals itself off from the outside like a fortress, with those towers. It brings something together with those domes of light. But, and it is important to always speak about that as well, firstly, it is no national community or similar. There's a clear hierarchic above and below and you can see that again in the architecture. Hitler is standing in the middle on top in the front, standing out with the symbol of power. The mass is below him. So, it's a clear hierarchy that is celebrated within this national community and the national community is exclusive. The Jews are not included, the foreigners are not, everything that's sick or weak is not included. That means exclusive, that means, not everybody's allowed to participate. So, when I'm looking at those buildings today, when you know all that, they are not simply harmless. They are memorials, in fact they are not beautiful either. I wouldn't say that about the Zeppelin Tribune and not about the Congress Hall. They are rather massive cubes. If you want to put it badly, they rather disfigure the cityscape. The beautiful area at the Dutzendteich would be much nicer without those two buildings, but they are important as memorials, because they show the harshness and inhumanity of National Socialism. That's why I always have a stomachache when those buildings are used as just an event location. We constantly have this, there's an account on Instagram, that's called “steintribüne” and there are all kinds of people meeting, that take nice pictures of the stone tribune and share them. That sometimes makes me a little uncomfortable, I'd say, because I always think: Sure, you don't always have to stare at those buildings with your head bowed, that would be completely wrong. But to always accept it as nice and “there's a pretty sunset”, then you have to express the whole story. I don't think it works like that, but I believe those buildings have that effect on today's users as well. And that's why it's important to intervene from time to time and say: “There's a story behind those buildings and you should know it”, without saying, it's forbidden to sit there and watch a sunset. That's alright.

ID:

You mentioned earlier that you went to the funfair as a child, that takes place next door. The site is also used as an event location, for example for Rock im Park or, I think, as a parking lot inside [the Congress Hall]. How does that change this impact?



AS:

What I am experiencing over the long period I knew the site, is that it's used more and more intensely. I had the impression that 20/30 years ago, the site was looked at from a further distance, because of its history. But the pressure to use it increases. And nowadays, maybe also because the buildings are talked more about, documenting their story. The museum Documentation Center has been around for over 20 years now. So, because that exists, there's less reluctance, I think, to say "Well, couldn't you do more with that?". And it's noticeable. So, the site has become something like a usable space. So, what's formerly been rather taboo, is no longer. And that surely has its positive sides talking openly about this history. But it also has the effect that you run the risk of losing these architectural documents, which they still are, from the Nazi era, but also from the post-war era. These buildings also show us about the treatment of those buildings after 19[45]. Especially concerning the Zeppelin Tribune, the way it looks today, there are clear signs of the post-war era. But of course, you run the risk that history vanishes through more and more intense usage. Formerly it would've been unthinkable to have big construction projects within these grounds. We do so now. We're building the new opera house of Nuremberg right in the middle of the Congress Hall. If I said that 20 years ago, people would have looked at me perplexed. They partly do today. But this construction project shows we might have a different way of dealing with those buildings now, which also has to be reflected critically. So, I think thinking about, what should be done with those memorials and what shouldn't, is appropriate. I have a critical view upon this construction project, that's changing this building for multiple decades at least, probably forever.

DH:

We also discussed in our seminar whether it's appropriate to use the site that way.

AS:

What was the conclusion of that debate?

DH:

That's a good question. [laughter] We also talked about... one of our professors mentioned he worked there and there was a warehouse for the Quelle catalog, right?

AS:

It was a warehouse for the mail-order company Quelle, for white goods, for big things. Not for the catalog but for actual parcels. But you hardly saw that, that has to be said as well. This use was relatively inconspicuous to what being built there today.

DH:

I think, someone argued that the power those monumental buildings have is being reduced. I don't quite understand how the memories are kept then though. I understand that, but I have a critical view as well.

ID: I believe, it was a lot more shocking for the Americans we had this course with, it was an American German project, that you try to turn those buildings into something positive.

AS:

I'm always, how should I say, attentive in this debate. I don't believe that it should be our goal to turn those places into something positive. Actually, we should keep them as places of debate. So, as something that's not clearly positive or negative, but rather a document of an era. That's what's valuable. We don't have that many buildings from that time, you have to say that clearly. If we change them completely, then they will be something else. And for me, the question is: does it have to be at this place? I have said that very clearly several times, because we actually have the problem now in the Documentation Center that



that we have presented the inner courtyard as empty, as “This is the result of the construction back then” and now in the future, in a few years, there will be a fairly large building in the inner courtyard. The first question will be: “What’s that?”. And then people will say: “That’s the Nuremberg Opera House.” And then the next question will be: “Why is that there?”. And then I’ll move on to a completely different topic and won’t be able to talk about how to deal with Nazi architecture and what it tells us today, including this unfinished building in the inner courtyard. Another interesting question, but I would have preferred for this monument to not be altered that much. But that was decided otherwise by a large majority in Nuremberg.

DH:

I was still thinking about whether this... You also said that it was propaganda, this whole architecture, whether you could also observe it in other regimes, as prominent as with the Nazis? And whether this is perhaps also used somewhere in today’s context?

AS:

I think you can say that. You can certainly also identify the special features of National Socialism in terms of its ideology and therefore also in terms of how this is expressed in architecture. But the major architectural projects, so to speak, such as the Soviet Union’s new plans for Moscow with a huge tower as a large, central Lenin mausoleum monument, that something like this had a similar aim, that is actually easy to see. And that also applies to Mussolini’s Italy. And it also applies to democracies. So the area in Washington should also express something. Even today’s skyscrapers. When Deutsche Bank puts up a huge skyscraper in Frankfurt, that’s also something that’s supposed to express something. I’m not saying that it’s all propaganda. But if you look at the totalitarian states of the 1920s and 1930s, or even Ceausescu’s Romania, these palaces that are being built, that are supposed to radiate, that’s a similar goal. But one thing is special, and that makes Nuremberg unique, I would say in a negative sense. Nowhere else has it been taken so far and is it still so tangible today that people are being drawn into this architecture. Many of the projects I have just mentioned have never been built. In Nuremberg, too, a lot of things that were planned have not been built. There is already a lot there and you can see from the Zeppelin Field and the ruined congress hall how it would have worked. I still notice that today, even as a student, but I also notice it now when I’m out and about: When you walk into the inner courtyard of the Congress Hall or when you approach the Zeppelin Field, it’s something that people react to. So, these buildings have an effect. You can always see that very clearly because they all pull out their cell phones. That means they somehow realize: “There’s something there, something has an effect on me.” That’s what makes this place so interesting, because I can immediately get into a conversation and a discussion without any major problem. For example, I’ve asked school classes in front of the façade of the Congress Hall: “Do you actually think it’s beautiful?” And I didn’t get the answer: “No! It’s really ugly! The Nazis built it!”. Instead, some people said: “The Nazis built it”, then I said: “It doesn’t matter, if you didn’t know that, would you find it beautiful?”. And then someone, I still remember this to this day, said the relatively harsh sentence: “Well, it’s nicer than the Federal Labor Office over there”. It’s one of those high-rise buildings from the 70s. It’s higher than the Congress Hall, it’s bigger than the Congress Hall and it’s actually relatively ugly. I think so. In other words, the criterion of beautiful/ugly doesn’t really get you anywhere, you also have to consider the political meaning behind it in addition to the aesthetics. If you don’t know anything, the buildings just seem that way. I do believe that if you don’t know anything and just say to yourself: “Oh, that looks nice here! I’ll take my wedding photo here.” That’s not a funny example, but it’s part of everyday life for us that people, young, newly married couples in their wedding attire, take photos in front of the Congress Hall and on the Zeppelin grandstand. You have to like that first. Well, I wouldn’t like that. The fact that they do that... I always asked myself, how does that work? It only works if you say: “I have no idea or I don’t care what these buildings actually are.” Then I can take my wedding photo there, but how can you forget history when you do something like that? I really don’t understand that, but it does happen.



ID:

Okay... that's actually... dystopic.

AS:

Yes, you could call it that. But then it's also the case that I've never dared, I've thought about it before, do I go there now and try to disrupt the photo shoot by saying clever things as a historian. I've never dared to do it before because I always think to myself, they must actually know that themselves. If that works for them, then fine. I actually think that's terrible. But well, that's just the way it is. And then you can see, on the other hand, that the effect of these buildings works. So, they are obviously an interesting backdrop, where you might feel attracted. That's also part of the intention.

ID:

Perhaps as a final question: we've already mentioned that beautiful/ugly is rather subjective. But do you personally think that the art contained in the architecture of a building can be appreciated despite the circumstances under which the art, or the architecture, was created? If you now perhaps say that the Nazi Party Rally Grounds are not necessarily beautiful, you could look at other such gigantic buildings, such as the Great Hall that was to be built in Germania.

AS:

I believe that it should first be noted that it is part of art history and architectural history. As an art historian, you can't avoid it either. It's also part of the history of German art and German architecture. In the past, my art history books tended to stop around '33 and then came modernism. And the Nazi era was a bit of an unpleasant, unartistic, anti-artistic phase. You make it too easy for yourself, that's also art, I would say. And in that respect, I would say it should also be included. Appreciating means perceiving something positively, to a certain extent. I don't think so, at least I can't. Well, I think both Arno Breker's figures and this building are too brutal, too bulky, too big. Especially when it comes to sculptures or paintings, they also express an image of man that I find disgusting. In other words, I can't appreciate it, but I value it as art and it's not as if it didn't exist, doesn't exist. And it's not as if there aren't some people, and there are quite a few, who describe precisely these people as beautiful. And who still have this kind of, shall I say, fascist ideal of beauty. So, I would definitely include Mr. Höcke in that, for example. In this respect, appreciating no, taking art history and art seriously, I think that's very important. That you don't pretend that you don't have to deal with it because it's not artistic anyway, it's bad or something. So, unfortunately, you have to realize that good artists, one of the outstanding examples is Leni Riefenstahl, that people like that, who can create genuinely, put themselves at the service of this ideology and then produce things that I actually no longer find beautiful. So, I can only get something out of this aesthetic to a very limited extent and if you also know where it leads, it's just awful. But regardless of that, yes, it is art. As a young person, I didn't... want to hear that, I'll say. But now I would just take that with me as a realization. Unfortunately, good art, art in general, artistic productions and inhuman goals are not mutually exclusive. So, unfortunately, you have to accept that artists are not good per se. A writer, a painter, but they sometimes do something and they are faced with the question of how we all end up: How do we relate to such a political system? What do we do? Do we participate? Don't participate? Do we participate a little? Do we make our compromises? Do we fundamentally reject it? Do we fight it? You always have a choice. You always want the artists to be upright. Unfortunately, in the course of my work here at the Documentation Center, I have come to know so many artists, some of whom were influenced by the Bauhaus and then took a turn in the direction of National Socialist aesthetics, so many of whom I would never have thought would produce something like this, that it is simply important to say: "Okay, this part of art exists and we have to take note of it."