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Urban planning in Nazi Germany: attack, triumph, terror in the European context, 1933–1945

; simultaneously published in German as Städtebau im Nationalsozialismus Angriff, Triumph, Terror im europäischen Kontext 1933–1945, Edited by Harald Bodenschatz, Victoria Grau, Christiane Post and Max Welch Guerra, Berlin, DOM Publishers, 2025, 624 pp., €128 (hardcover)

Karl Friedhelm Fischer

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BOOK REVIEW

Urban planning in Nazi Germany: attack, triumph, terror in the European context, 1933–1945; simultaneously published in German as Städtebau im Nationalsozialismus Angriff, Triumph, Terror im europäischen Kontext 1933–1945, Edited by Harald Bodenschatz, Victoria Grau, Christiane Post and Max Welch Guerra, Berlin, DOM Publishers, 2025, 624 pp., €128 (hardcover)

Coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the liberation from National Socialism on 8 May 1945 and with the associated widespread commemorative events, the publication of this book marked the culmination of a research project carried out over a period of 25 years.

Far from being the end of the story, the book presentation was followed by a remarkable series of public lectures and discussions clarifying the significance of this research for dealing with today`s realities – the legacies and lessons.

The book is a milestone in the research on the international context of urban design and planning in National Socialism. Transcending clichés and 'tunnel vision'[1] that have often limited the understanding of the processes behind and the connections between dictatorship in the first half of the twentieth century and the associated production of space, the book opens a whole set of new windows each looking out upon a different aspect of the complex subject matter. This observation may appear surprising in view of the existing literature in the field. It appears the more valid since this book represents the culmination of a series of large-format monographs edited by Bodenschatz and his colleagues, each researched in depth by a team of experts in the field. Focusing on the USSR (2003) Italy (2012) Spain (2019) and Portugal (2021) these copiously illustrated books have been available so far only in German.

That having been said attention has to be directed at a couple of notable exceptions in the form of books that have appeared in German as well as English. One is a volume on the Urban Renewal of Historic Centres in European Dictatorships.[2] The other publications to be mentioned in this context are two exhibition catalogues reviewed for Planning Perspectives in 2024.[3] Excellent publications in themselves, the vast four-volume companion on which the major exhibition on Planning and Construction during National Socialism was based never appeared in English. While, however, the perspective that this substantial contribution to the history of European planning in the twentieth century was going to 'remain alien to the Anglosphere'[4] appeared disappointing, the publication of Urban Planning in Nazi Germany has finally made all the difference.

A central key to this research and to its significance in today's discourse lies in the definition of the terms urban planning and *Städtebau*, upon which the English and the German versions of the book rest, and in the broad scope adopted – in terms of content and in more than one sense, its international perspective.

Close reading of the German original and the English translation in parallel reveals the challenges that the overall very good translation has had to face. A Glossary of German Terms at the end of the book is helpful, but the way in which the English version of the book deals with the term *Städtebau* remains problematic. The team of editors and translators have decided in favour of the umbrella term *urban planning* rather than *urban design*, which was felt to be too closely tied to an architectural

[1]Bodenschatz in Fischer/Altrock 2018.
[2]Bodenschatz and Welch Guerra, *The Power of Past Greatness*.
[3]Grau and Welch Guerra, Review of: Independent Commission of Historians
[4]Ibid., 1382.

understanding of the subject matter. While it has to be recognized that there is no precise equivalent translation that summarizes the features of this specifically German approach to spatial planning and design, the blanket translation of *Städtebau* as *planning* is blurring important nuances that get lost in translation.

Overall, the scope of what the terms urban design and planning as employed in this book encompass could not be broader. As elaborated in the introduction, it extends from the underlying fundamental conceptions – from drawings to the built products, structures, spaces and building ensembles at all scales; including all typologies, encompassing elements from urban and regional development concepts, urban renewal, metropolitan planning and new town plans – through to rural and landscape features, villages, infrastructure, military facilities and camps of all sorts. It also includes the processes and the connections between all elements involved, the governance arrangements including finance and legal frameworks, the realm of the professional world with its associations and publications, the supporting narratives and propaganda frameworks, as well as the international background providing inspiration for myths and models of urban design.

What at first sight may appear as an overly broad approach turns out to be the prerequisite for recognizing the true significance of core elements of Nazi planning and of connections that have often remained invisible. Beneath the familiar smokescreen of phantasms like the mythical 'World Capital Germania', the banal reality of the common wooden barrack emerges as the most successful building type of the Nazi era. Similarly, the propaganda focused on the architects in the limelight around Albert Speer has often directed our attention away from the banality of evil behind the activities of technocrats like Fritz Todt that stabilized the dictatorship and oiled the genocidal machinery.

Beyond the very broad scope of the analysis, it is the international perspective that distinguishes this book from the existing literature in various ways. One obvious dimension lies in the internationally comparative perspective of the period of dictatorships of the times, which has never been explored in such detail before. Another important dimension is addressed in the final chapter, which raises the theme of decidedly differing 'cultures of remembrance'. Each of the European countries has dealt with the urban design and planning legacies of their dictatorships in different ways, and even after 25 years of research on the subject, the book comes to the conclusion that there has hardly been any exchange. The book is therefore culminating in a call for a renewed international debate on how we understand and address the architectural and spatial heritage of twentieth-century dictatorships. Yet another beginning.

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Karl Friedhelm Fischer
University of New South Wales, University of Kassel and Technical University Berlin, Germany
k.fischer@unsw.edu.au

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