

Front to Rear: Architecture and Planning during World War II

Conference co-organized by the Institute of Fine Arts, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal, and Princeton University's School of Architecture

Saturday, March 7 and Sunday, March 8, 2009

Institute of Fine Arts, New York University
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Architecture, War and Genocide: Military Goals and the Development of SS Concentration Camp Architecture

World War II is a defining war for understanding modern history not only because of its place in 20th-century geopolitics but particularly because of the scale of warfare and new level of brutality. As is well known, central to the Nazi military campaign in the East were the ideological goals of state leaders to expand the land available for "German" settlement and, concomitantly, to rid that land of those designated undesirable, above all the European Jews. The architectural remnants of the SS concentration camps have become emblematic for the experience of victims in this campaign as well as the extremes of Nazi policy.

And yet in spite of their status as some of the most infamous construction in the modern period, relatively few architectural historians take up the concentration camps in their analysis of German architecture. Further, the minority of architectural historians who have analyzed the camps tend to focus on one site rather than the system as a whole and naturally concern themselves with the experience of the victims rather than the perpetrator's interests and view of architecture. Deborah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt's important work on Auschwitz is an exception to many of these trends. Still, in terms of the military campaigns going on in the East, even they tend to see Auschwitz as an ideological site that developed over time parallel to the military campaigns rather than as integral to them. In this account, the concentration camps and the waging of war produce simultaneous if related goals.

This paper argues against the isolation of the concentration camps from the war by taking a broader view of the construction of SS concentration camps, analyzing their typological development and use of specific architectural and spatial traditions. In particular, it argues that the imperial goals of the war as emphasized in the political economic goals of the state are integral for helping to explain the scale and architectural choices made at Auschwitz and other concentration camps in the SS universe. In so doing, I look not only at the important parts of the camps that were sites of massive oppression but also at those sites built for the SS themselves, analyzing administrative and visual evidence concerning their own goals and their own construction. With this focus, the intersection of racist ideological goals and the military political economy of empire are manifest. Refocusing on the architecture of the concentration camps helps us to explain the implementation of warfare, its radicalization and its role in an imperial drive of unifying diverse ideological and political agendas.

Paul B. Jaskot is Professor of Art History at DePaul University. He is the author of *The Architecture of Oppression: The SS, Forced Labor, and the Nazi Monumental Building Economy*

as well as the co-editor of *Beyond Berlin: Twelve German Cities Confront the Nazi Past*. His research focuses on the political history of German art and architecture with a specific focus on the questions raised by Nazi cultural policy and its postwar impact. In addition to his research, he is the President of the College Art Association.

Archived September 2011