

Granite on the Ground: Former Nazi Party Rally Grounds, Nuremberg/Germany. A brief introduction

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Abstract:

The research project “*Politik durch den Boden*” that this short overview presentation is based on focuses on the relation between material and political intention in the public sphere. It is working towards answering the question to what extent are intentions of policy realized by decisions of material and structure? The object of research is the pavement covering found on political representative areas. These are areas which have experienced a fundamental political upheaval within the last 20 years.

My profession as authoress lies between the disciplines of fine art and spatial research. The aim of my work is to question the built space. Why are areas covered with concrete, others with historical small plaster and others with stones deliberately from Italy? I am not interested in obvious answers related to function or economics. The hidden idea, physical knowledge and haptic are my areas of interest.

The following is an excerpt which takes up the matter of the underlying symposium “Urban design and dictatorship in the 20th century”. The main issue is a pavement design called the Great Road (*Große Straße*) at the site of the Former Nazi Party Rally Grounds (*Reichsparteitagsgelände*) in the southeast of Nuremberg, Germany. To mention it briefly: it was one of the main gathering areas for the nationalist party NSDAP in the twenties and thirties.¹ It was here that Leni Riefenstahl produced the state-owned movie “Triumph of the Will”. The site is a highly representative area and was designed in 1933 by Albert Speer. The area is 24,5 sq. km² large and was intentionally designed to be enormous in dimension.

¹ Centrum Industriekultur Nürnberg (ed.) 1992, 34

² Ibid. 47



*Great Road. Rally Ground Nuremberg/Germany.
Source: Photograph by Marie Luise Birkholz 2013.*



Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-1982-1130-602
Foto: o.Ang. | 8. September 1936

*Former Nazi Party Rally Ground. Nuremberg/Germany.
Source: Photo 183-1982-1130-502 Bundesbildarchiv.*



*Map out of the Documentation Center Former Nazi Party Rally Grounds, revised slightly.
Source: Photograph by Marie Luise Birkholz 2013.*

Case study of the Great Road

The construction for military parades is 60 meters wide and was planned with a length of two kilometers, though merely 1.5 km were realized. The intention of the area was to accommodate the troops to march in formation or to stand next to the street, though both of these never happened.³

The main axis in the Rally Grounds structurally and symbolically constitutes the idea of Adolf Hitler and Albert Speer for the Great Road construction. The City of Nuremberg is highly symbolical due to its emperor's castle where middle age emperors were crowned in the past. For Adolf Hitler, the Great Road connects the historical emperor's castle with "his" Luitpold Arena on the Rally Ground, in this manner connecting the – so called – Third Reich to the First Reich.⁴ The Luitpold Arena is the place where the highly symbolic blood flag consecration – in german *Blutfahnenweihe* – was held.

Additionally all this lays on an ideological axis of towns.⁵ The Great Road faces the town Regensburg and its historical German temple of honor of the fatherland Walhalla, built in 1842 by King Ludwig I due to the perceived humiliation by Napoleon. The formerly associated pond *Dutzendteich* was brutally divided in two to accommodate the architectural idea of theses axes.

³ Geländeinformationssystem ehemaliges Reichsparteitagsgelände.
http://reichsparteitagsgelaende.de/stationen/grosse_strasse.htm. (12.06.2014)

⁴ See Reschke 2002.

⁵ Ibid.



*Great Road 1991. Short before renovation.
Source: Photo A 40 Nr. L-5428-17 Stadtarchiv Nürnberg.*

After the end of the Second World War this area was used as airport, street, open place and parking place. The paving stones were immediately destroyed by the presence of unplanned usages and by the poor, washed-out construction itself.

In 1991, as the structural condition became intolerable, a public debate arose about the expensive renovation of the area. In contrast to previous years the public, the town Nuremberg and even the nearby Nuremberg trade fair were becoming more and more sensitive to the importance of this piece of terrifying German history. Together with preservationists they found a compromise, which is still current to this day.⁶ The established museum section is 200 meters large and was established through the renovation. The Great Road is a monument to the National Socialist architecture.

⁶ Fischer 1996, 443



Up: Great Road, museum section. Labels came here for the World Cup. Down: Great Road – stones. Source: Photograph by Marie Luise Birkholz 2013.

In formation: 60,000 granite slabs

In the forties a total of 60,000 valuable granite slabs⁷ were laying here. Each one is 400 kg heavy and 1.2 square meter in area. In general these stones appear in different shades of gray and black. There is a rhythm of six bright stones followed by a dark one. In addition the slabs create a squared pattern by which the troops could orient themselves according to the scheduled plan. The stone surface is untreated and handmade.

This road was made by civil workers. The date of construction was too early to have been made by people who were forced to work in concentration camps. This is shown by the founding years of concentration camps with granite quarries as well as reported by the historian of the Documentation Center.⁸



*Sculpture with inaccurate inscription by Karl Prantl in the city center of Nürnberg, which is made out of stones of the Great Road.
Source: Photograph by Marie Luise Birkholz 2013.*

Nevertheless there is a sculpture created from these paving stones called the Nürnberger Kreuzweg (1991) with the inscription which tells the viewer that “every stone is a fingerprint from some abused and maltreated human.” Original stones of the Great Road are used to accuse Nazi crimes.⁹ It seems to be entirely plausible that this road was built by crimes against humanity, as perhaps written directly into the stones. I do not want to trivialize these crimes nor do I wish to discuss about the work of Karl Prantl. The question concerning us here instead is what makes these stones even more symbolical than they are?

⁷ <http://www.bauzeugen.de/rpt-gelaende.html>. (06.06.2014)

⁸ Interview Dr. Alexander Schmidt, Dokumentationszentrum Reichsparteitagsgelände 12.11.2013.

⁹ To built up the congress hall and the German stadium thousands of concentration camp prisoners were forced. Zimmermann and Wolf (ed.) 1999, 26

Gaps, edges and the ant's perspective

Nowadays granite, in relation to other pavement-materials, is an expensive natural stone and is therefore not often used in urban spaces. Granite pavers were often replaced in the postwar-period. It can be said that they do not evoke good memories of the past.



Atrium, congress hall, Nuremberg. Storage of original stones under “transparent“ viewing balcony. Source: Photograph by Marie Luise Birkholz 2013.

These 400 kg heavy and unfamiliarly large-scale paving stones were only laid here to support human troops, this disproportion to me states a lot about the “weight“ set upon the NS troops. It is simply not possible to pick the slabs up or to use them somehow spontaneously without the use of a special technique. The ordinary human body is powerless against the building material. It is also known that granite is a very cold and stable material, which lasts for a long period of time. The material in the presented shape out performs the ordinary human being in terms of lasting duration, lasting and the strength.

The material attains an acoustic dimension through the addition of the Prussian Step (*Preussenschritt*) of the troops. Larger surfaces mean fewer gaps, which can increase the acoustic body of the material. Hard leather soles studded with iron nails marching to the rhythm, which echoed across the Dutzendteich pond must have been aggressively loud.



Seam “from Luipold Arena to Empirical Castle Nuremberg”.
Source: Photograph by Marie Luise Birkholz 2013.

The structure of the Great Road is very different as compared to representative pavement designs found today. I mentioned already the political and also physical axis upon which the Great Road lays on, connecting Walhalla to the Nazi Party Rally Grounds. For my studies on representative pavement designs I invented the ant's eye perspective. What path would an ant take if she were only to walk along the seams over the Great Road? Her path through the seams would follow exactly the ideological and built direction of the fascist architects. The edges of the stones were sawn sharp, so that the seams were characterised by flat surfaces, right angles and a material meant to last forever. The accurate cross connection connects every piece of the street to the ideological superstructure. What ironically was missing during the planning for the future millennia¹⁰ was a sustainable manner of building. The 60,000 pieces of 400 kg heavy and 10 cm thick paving stones were laying on a 5 to 7 cm thick compensation layer which itself was placed upon a 20 cm thick layer of concrete.¹¹ The open joints ensured that the construction itself was washed out already after only a few years after the construction of this “monumental” building, among other factors. Without foundation, the most stable material becomes instead a very sensitive one.

¹⁰ Reichel 1991, 122

¹¹ Fischer 1996, 443-447



Great Road – sharpened edges. Source: Photograph by Marie Luise Birkholz 2013.

Picture of a sharpened history

The sides and corners of these granite paving stones were “sharpened” during the renovation. There was a will to “sharpen” them as to be more concrete. An epoxy-sand-mixture cannot replace granite, but nonetheless this newly produced “sharpness” must have been important, which evokes the question: what does this show us regarding their meaning?

Historically, it is interesting for us to note that the original sides must have been cut using a stone saw which had been just invented at the time as an on-site historian had heard from a visiting group of stonemasons. This means that, at the same time, this type of straightness of stone edges especially at this length was something really new in the thirties. At the time, the Great Road must have been innovative and state-of-the-art, regardless of non-sustainable character of the construction. Nowadays, in the context of art and architecture, sharp edges are often mentioned as a tool to produce abstraction.

Today this surface “frightens” the visitors, as stated by the historian, but also by a grade school student. They described the feelings that arise when standing in a group of 30 persons in this place, being surrounded by pleasant nature yet nevertheless feeling completely lost. The Great Road was built to represent discipline and superiority as does the Prussian Step. Does this area, with its black lines and material characteristics, still dictate to the visitor a regulatory system to whom you cannot do justice? I would like to recall what Hartmut Frank expressed regarding the currently quite consolidated concept of National Socialist planning.¹² Is it really the material what “dictates” its own interpretation or is it the visitors knowledge about its historical development? What role does the Documentation Centre Nazi Party Rally Grounds play as kind of framework for the Great Road in respect to these interpretations? Does the fear comes from the hundreds of granite slabs or does it come from remembering all the pictures seen before in the Documentation Centre? Because of the info boards and the Documentation Centre itself is it not possible to visit the Great Road without getting to know its origin. Due to this the look at this surface occurs in a specific directed way.

¹² Frank (ed.) 1985, 7-10



Grade of school on the Great Road. Source: Photograph by Marie Luise Birkholz 2013



Source: Photograph by Marie Luise Birkholz 2013

Bottom up

Due to the format, all of this is quite reduced. Many more observations, such as the tangible coldness of granite, the surface, the current state and many more aspects are still missing. However, I would like to mention one main conclusion: in my opinion we have recognized through the exposed an example of the processional route to the claiming of power, which in effect only allows for two types of attitudes: to feel victimized or to feel as a welcomed part of the masses. A single human is nothing, but in “formation“ he means everything.¹³ Paul Ludwig Troost, the second most influential German Nazi architect, mentioned sharp, hard and heavy acting forms as the main formal language of representative Nazi architecture.¹⁴ The horizontal, massive construction is essential, of which the Great Road is a prime example. The building itself, having been unused, remained in the status of a model. However, this surface presents an enormous amount of ideological intentions. Since this case study still exists as an accessible area today, it makes history comprehensible in a tangible sense.

Nevertheless, even if all these common interpretations of so called Nazi architecture are perfectly fit to interpret such a surface, a comparison is still necessary. After the war part of the granite slabs were removed by individuals for personal use in their gardens and personal properties and in this manner “lost” an aspect of their political connotation. So, it can be asked here, what makes a pavement design in the broadest sense political? For now I will answer this question by mentioning the structure, size and location of a pavement design. There is no fascist granite, but there is an arrangement which mirror fascist ideals.

English version revised by Karl Eckert

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¹³ Reichel 1991, 301

¹⁴ He said that concerning the House of German Art in Munich. Ibid., 297

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