

The Berlin Olympic Stadium

How to deal with the first 'Gesamtkunstwerk' of the Third Reich today?

In this brief paper, I will focus on the integration of modern tasks – *the top sporting venues today and tomorrow* – into a historic monument like the Berlin Olympic Stadium. It is widely known that this complex was inaugurated for the 11th Olympics in 1936, turned into a political rally-field for the representation of the NS-Dictatorship, was partly destroyed in the final battle on Berlin in 1945, and in post-war times used as a denazified place of pure sports character where the International Athletic Games (ISTAF), the cup final of German Soccer Union (DFB), and other events regularly took place.

When Berlin applied for the Olympics 2000 in 1990, a debate arose about the political contamination of the place itself. Peaceful games at the beginning of the New Millennium, how could this happen in a stadium that represented above all the bad attributes of 20th century Germany. It was discussed to build a new stadium, or to alter the old one so radically that only little should remind us of this political dimension. Besides that, another debate was opened. The officials of the sports institutions like the National Olympic Committee, the German Sports Association and the Berlin football club Hertha BSC tried to transform the stadium for their purposes. This would have led to the demolition of all interior parts of the stadium as it happened under different prepositions in Barcelona in 1992, and further to deep interventions in the surrounding area which is characterised by huge free spaces, like the so-called May-Field and the hockey and warm-up spaces as well as the area of the German sports-forum where buildings would have been added. The official version was that this would be the condition to get in potent investors for a private-public partnership.

In contrast the Berlin Office of Monument Protection tries to convince future users and investors that the whole Olympic Area of 1936 is a unique historic monument that exists in its authentic appearance. For more than half a century the whole area was protected by the British Allied Troops in Berlin who used the Sport forum as their headquarters and kept it in excellent condition with very little alterations.

The meaning of the Olympic can be described as a knot-point of very different meanings, architectural traditions and ideas of sports. I will focus on three main topics:

1. The place is a unique part of the history of sports, especially of the Olympics. The first building of the German Stadium, erected in 1912 by Otto March for the 6th Olympics in 1916 which did not take place because of the First World War, was partly discovered beside the March tunnel and other places. In 1925 to 1928 the German Stadium was extended by the German Sport Forum erected by Werner and Walter March, sons of Otto March, and finally the present stadium, 1933 to 1936, that was the most modern one in Europe in the 1930s. Also it is important to say that March in his general plan was highly influenced by the 10th Olympic Games of Los Angeles in 1932 with its Memorial Coliseum.
2. The Berlin Olympic Stadium is the largest and most spectacular monument of the early NS-period. It is characterised by a highly rational architecture, which after 1937, when Albert Speer was appointed as General Building Inspector (GBI) for the new Berlin, was given up in favour of more eclectic architecture like the Reichs-Chancellery of 1937. The Olympic Stadium is a good example of frozen Modernism which was adopted from the late Weimar Republic without any problems for the demands of national-socialist representation. Berlin's Air Force Ministry (present ministry of economy) or the Tempelhof Airport, built by Mendelsohn's pupil Ernst Sagebiel, are other examples. The political impact of the whole area was implemented by structural elements like the main axis that focused on the so-called Führer-Tower at the end of the May-Field and various other towers, flanking the stadium as representation of the 'Arian' German tribes like the Bavarians, the Saxons, the Frisians etc. The May-Field itself was a rally-field, like the Nuremberg party rally-field by Albert Speer in 1935, and a specific political iconography merged the virtues of sports with an aggressive military program, so that sports for the NS-Regime could be used as a para-military institution. According to Goebbels sports were meant "to strengthen the character of the German people, imbuing it with the fighting spirit and steadfast camaraderie necessary in the struggle for its existence", which meant the preparation of a new war. This became obvious in the Langemarck Memorial Hall that was located under the Führer-Tower and commemorated the death of hundreds of young volunteers at Langemarck in Belgium during the first days of the First World War. The whole structure, combination of tower and memorial, March took over from the Los Angeles Stadium of 1932, but located it as a point de vue at the end of the main axis far away from the stadium. Nevertheless, the tower with its substructure was dominant because it was visible through the slot from inside the stadium which formed the Marathon Gate, the representative entrance. In a metaphoric sense the warrior and the sportsman were directly connected. This fitted into the official propaganda of the Nazi Regime which planned a new war since spring 1936 within the next four years.
3. The third aspect is a more artistic one. The whole area of the Olympic Stadium with the sport forum, the Greek theatre and the free space is one of the outstanding landscape monuments combining the idea of a modern landscape garden with variations of representative building-types. Nature and the ancient tradition of architecture should create a unique ensemble, that in 1936 the Bauhaus-member Herbert Beyer transformed into his famous photo-montage *publicity*. Before the German Stadium was constructed from 1910 onwards, the whole area was part of the Grunewald, the main forest of the city of Berlin, which is famous for its sandy ground and its marvellous pines and lovely hills. These botanical and topographic characteristics became an integral part of the land-

scape-garden conception which is well preserved and one of the very few examples in Germany.

Another point is the decoration of the whole Stadium with different sculptures, reliefs etc. supporting the (political) meaning of the architecture. Like in ancient Olympia architecture and sculpture were meant to create an entity, the artistic frame-work for the games. Here you can find the most complete ensemble of NS-sculpture belonging to the so-called tectonic period, stone-cut sculptures in lime-stone, like the charioteers of Josef Wackerle, corresponding with the stone material of the stadium and the theatre – the reliefs of Adolf Wamper – which was common until 1937. Thereafter the classical ideal of bronze sculptures became the paradigm of a new Neo-Classicism which Hitler demanded in his cultural-political speech when he opened the House of German Art in Munich in 1937.

To demonstrate this complex history to a wider public the Berlin Office of Monument Protection has a conception for a public historic path that documents the different stratification of the place.

According to these different forms of meaning and the historic and political complexity of the Berlin Olympic Stadium the Office of Monument Protection of the State of Berlin focused on the preservation of the entire complex as a multi-functional arena that can be used for various top sporting events on the one hand, and could house all the national and regional sport institutions that would like to join this place. Meanwhile everyone agrees that the Olympic stadium is a monument of European rank, and one of the undeniable landmarks of the City of Berlin. The Office of Monument Protection, supported by the Technical University Berlin, which organised a conference about this topic in 1998, developed a conception of a *critical conservation* to minimise the feared interventions which were planned by the investors.

When in 1993 the application failed for the Olympic Games 2000 some good conceptions were lost. Alternative conceptions were presented by the football unions who wanted to create an *Arena 2000* with merely mono-functional conceptions. Some radical voices wanted the demolition of the old stadium or the deterioration into a ruin, like the ancient Roman Coliseum. An alternative stadium was planned for the site of the hockey-stadium or on the May-Field. Finally the conception of critical conservation and a multi-functional conception for various kinds of sports was successful. In May 1998, the Senate of Berlin decided to renovate the stadium under the conditions of the Berlin Monument Protection Office. In December 1998 the project of the German architects Gerkan, Marg, and partners (GMP) was chosen by the Berlin government.

In contrast to other projects that were presented in the competition in 1998, GMP planned a refurbishment without spectacular architectural interventions. For example, Claude Vasconi Architects had planned a monumental glass-iron ceiling that covered a huge square with the old stadium in the centre. Vasconi's project, that can be compared with the first plan for the Reichstag by Norman Foster in 1992, wanted to emphasise the new construction as an independent piece of architecture in sharp contrast to the old stadium. An image of modernity would be created as a new landmark without the destruction of the old monument. Nevertheless, the sensitive relations of the place would have been disturbed.

GMP have made the decision to respect the historical dimension of the area. Only the roof that should cover the whole inner ring and parts of the green, was a new addition. After the bad experiences with the present roof that was added in 1974 GMP presented a unobtrusive cantilever construction with minimised supporters. According to this project the green level would sink about 3 meters to get more seats. The whole lower ring of the spectator's seats lying under ground-level has to be renewed, because the concrete was in bad condition and this part was damaged by groundwater. Although the layering is very modest, the proportions will be disturbed, and the whole Marathon Gate has to be altered to maintain the view from the stadium onto the main axis. The zone of pillars that divides the lower from the upper ring has to be refurbished for press-lounges but the original articulation will be kept. Another compromise is the construction of a basement garage for the VIP-lounges that is located under the south part of the stadium and connected to the main entrances and the S-Bahn station. Therefore the Coubertin festival hall has to be demolished but will be reconstructed after the garage has been built. Altogether the conception guarantees that the stadium can be preserved in its original form and material with a maximum of the authentic structure.

To sum up: Until today Berlin owns one of the biggest stadiums in Europe that was planned for 100.000 spectators and can presently hold 76.000 persons. As an outstanding historic monument it has to be refurbished, and also reconciled with certain demands of modern sport activities. It has to be a public open space that can be used for various events. After ten years of hard and tiring debates, an excellent conception has been found that takes into account the necessities of monument protection as well as the demands of a lively multi-functional place. The budget of this renovation for the 21st century is about 300 million Euro. It is necessary to start now, otherwise the costs will increase and the condition of the place will decline more and more. At least the responsible persons, the politicians and the sport officials need to foster this project, otherwise German sport will be embarrassed once again.