

URBAN PLANNING IN NAZI GERMANY

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BOOK REVIEW OF

Bodenschatz, Harald; Grau, Victoria; Post, Christiane and Welch Guerra, Max (eds.) (2025). Urban Planning in Nazi Germany. Attack, triumph, terror in the European context, 1933–1945. Dom Publishers, Berlin.

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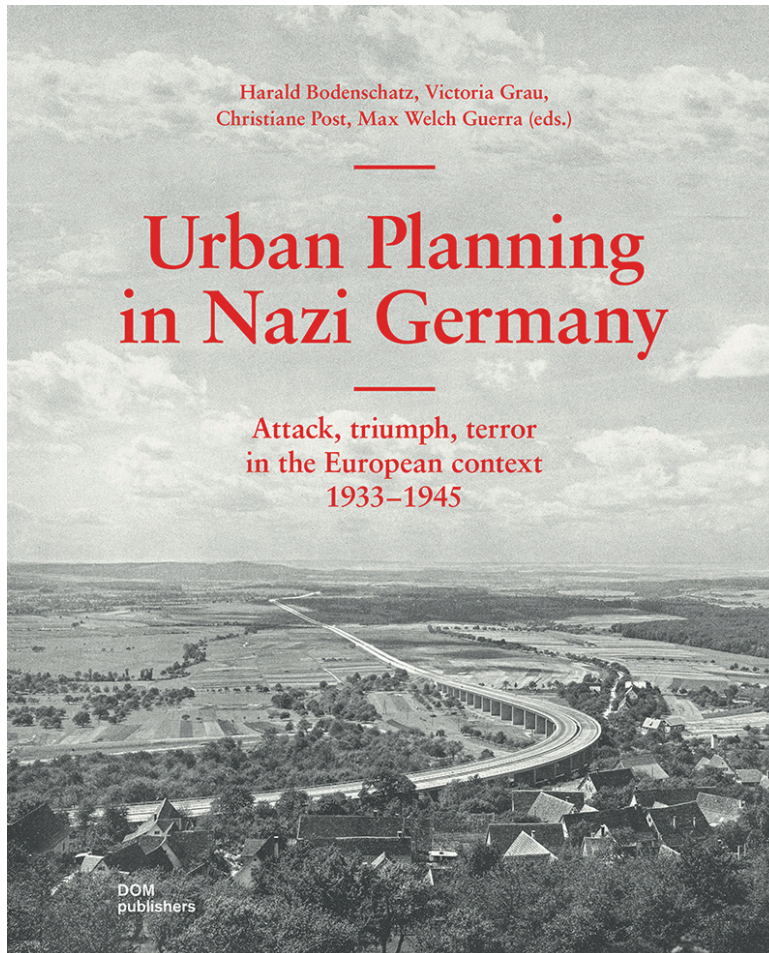


Figure 1. *Urban Planning in Nazi Germany* by Harald Bodenschatz a.o., book cover.

The volume *Urban Planning in Nazi Germany* starts with a curious letter, written by the functionalist architect Ernst May and his wife, Ilse. Both had just returned disillusioned from the Soviet Union, where they witnessed the ousting of modern architecture by the emerging dictator Josef Stalin. The letter, addressed to Ilse's mother, dates to the end of March 1933. In the face of the Weimar Republic's collapse, they attribute to the German people a lack of democratic traditions. In a key phrase they conclude, «A dictatorship is probably the most appropriate form of government for Germany today.» (Bodenschatz, 2025, p. 25.)

The letter reflects hereby a general sentiment among the modernist architects and urban planners of their time who see a moderate dictatorship as a premise for the realisation of their revolutionary urban schemes. It is indeed striking that the futuristic urban plans of Ludwig Hilbersheimer, Le Corbusier and Marcello Piacentini harbour an inherent totalitarian element. It is therefore not surprising when the English urbanist Patrick Abercrombie judges fascist Italy to be «at the moment ... the most energetic town-planning nation in Europe». (ibidem)

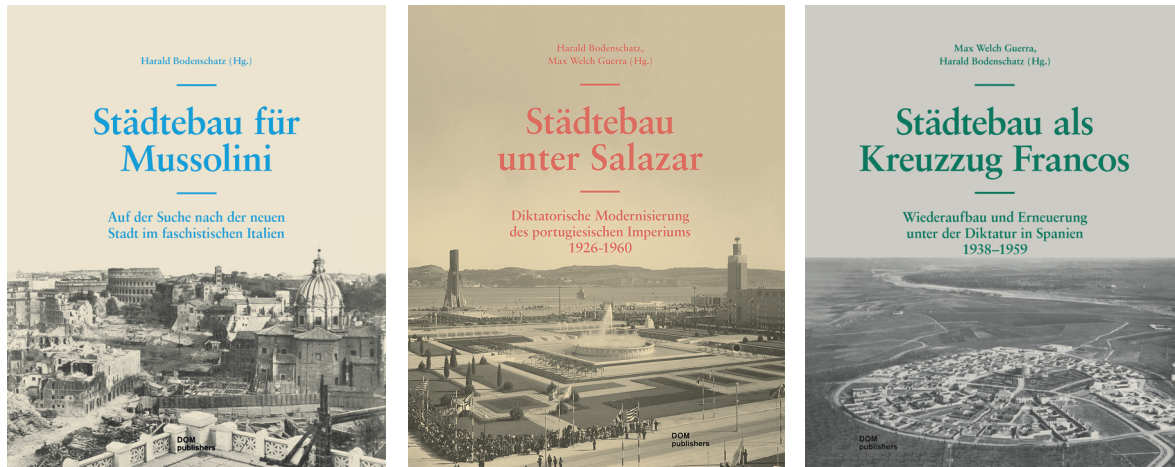
Figure 2. "Drive Safely on German roads", propaganda poster used for the promotion of the Reichautobahn, ca 1936; in: Bodenschatz, H. a.o., *Urban Planning in Nazi Germany*, p.79.



We have seen a number of books on the subject of architecture and urban planning during the Nazi era in Germany. It is the genuine strength of this book not to base its effect on widely known illustrations of Speer's Germania or Gieseler's grim architecture, sending pleasant shivers down the spines of its readers. The premise of this book describes a general sentiment of frustration among the self-declared avant-garde about the inability of the European democracies to handle the imminent housing crisis of the inter-war era and the radical changes to the urban tissue that the introduction of the automobile required. Many of them saw in the emerging autocrats and dictators a welcome opportunity to topple the sluggish planning bureaucracy and their democratically elected clients. This volume challenges the idea of the uniqueness of German and Italian urban planning and embeds the work of German urban planners in a European context, drawing parallels to similar symptoms in Portugal, Spain, America and the Soviet Union. It illustrates the mutual awareness of planners in different countries throughout the 1930s, creating an impressive patchwork of interrelated monumentalist, if not totalitarian, urban concepts.

Urban Planning in Nazi Germany explores the entire width of spatial planning, from housing and new representative town plans to infrastructure projects, industry, leisure, and planning related to the «Germanisation» of the East, including concentration and labour camps. The volume is split into three chapters: «Attack» (1933–1937), «Triumph» (1937–1941) and «Terror» (1941–1945), reflecting the arch of the 12 years of Nazi rule. Between the main chapters, the «International Exhibition in Paris 1937» and the exhibition «Planning and Construction in the East» from 1941 are presented, marking the pinnacle and turning points of the three phases of urban planning identified by the authors. The book continues with a contribution on urban planning after the «Collapse», describing the international echo of the immediate postwar period.

Finally, the volume subsides with the question of «Remembering: but what and how?», focusing on the changing role of public remembering. In the face of emerging generations unfamiliar with both Nazi rule and the subsequent World War and likewise estranged from the thinking of the 1968 generation of politicised intellectuals, the redefinition of the urban planning legacy of the Nazi era is on its way. Given the international nature of totalitarian thinking, the authors are presenting a European approach to remembering and acknowledging this volume as a significant contribution.



The book is consequentially set up in a series of books edited by the publishers, examining totalitarian planning during the period, reaching, among others, *Urban Planning in the Shadow of Stalin* (Bodenschatz 2004), *Urban Planning for Mussolini* (Bodenschatz 2011), *Urban Planning under Salazar* (Bodenschatz, Guerra 2019) and *Urban Planning as Francos Crusade* (2021). This impressive volume of work is a testament to Harald Bodenschatz's over 50 years of research on the subject and the perseverance of the publishers to gather it into voluptuously illustrated volumes. This volume, with its wide range of cases and large number of illustrations, like documents, plans and photos, is very well suited as a curriculum in the teaching of architectural and planning history. We wish this book a wide reception and presence in university libraries. Its large size and hardcover binding make it just another striking proof for the necessity of the presence of physical books.

References

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Figure 3. Three other volumes in the series edited by Harald Bodenschatz, all published by DOM publishers.