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The Architecture of the Documentation Center

A shaft – a 110 meter long walkway made of glass and steel – pierces the intimidating National Socialist architecture of the Congress Hall. This deconstructivist section designed by Graz architect Günther Domenig cuts right through the monumental structure and the severe geometry of the Nazi building. By breaking into this rectangular system, Domenig clearly makes his contemporary architectural mark, at the same time expressing a powerful counter-point.

In summer 1998, the City of Nuremberg issued invitations for an architects' competition for the Documentation Center Nazi Party Rally Grounds. With the backdrop of a sinister past, the design brief was not only to accommodate the Documentation Center into the north wing of the former Congress Hall, but also to originate a credible way of dealing with the NS architecture and the mind-set that produced it. Graz architect Prof. Günther Domenig won the competition. His design, a section through the building, a diagonal walkway made from glass and steel, pierces the North wing of the Congress Hall like a shaft or a surgeon's cut.

One particular point in favour of Domenig's design is its open aspect, ideal for exhibition and instructive purposes. The building measures suggested and implemented by the architect open up an almost ideal tour around the rooms on the upper floor of the north wing of the Congress Hall. The round tour generally follows existing room structures with room sizes varying between 18 and 450 square metres.

This difference between the rooms alone makes the tour interesting. Very few technical changes have been made. Among these are the bridging of an interior courtyard between two stairwells and the provision of entry facilities for disabled visitors. Neither the architect nor the exhibition makers did change the essence of this listed building.

The exhibition rooms remained largely in their present unfinished state. In no way this construction wanted to "finish off" what the National Socialist builders began and were subsequently unable to complete. Rather the bare, unfinished brick construction is intended

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to demonstrate – beyond the mythology and glorification – the banality of megalomania of the "Thousand Year Reich".

The tour of the exhibition ends in the south-west corner of the north wing, allowing a view of the interior courtyard of the Congress Hall and conveying the sense of the vastness of the building. The glass "shaft" leads visitors from the last exhibition room back down to the entrance hall. The walkway cuts through the entire north wing – thus allowing further glimpses of parts of the Congress Hall which are not normally accessible, such as the "Hall of Pillars" or the "Standard Courtyard".

The rooms include:

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| – Permanent Exhibition | 1,300 square metres |
| – Room for Introductory Film | 70 square metres |
| – Lecture / Film theatre | 130 square metres |
| – Study Forum | 250 square metres |

In addition, on the ground floor, areas of 120 square metres and a hall of 660 square metres are available for temporary exhibitions.

The Architect

Günther Domenig was born in Klagenfurt, Austria, in 1934. He is a follower of the Deconstructivist School of architecture. His family background, in his own words, was "open to National Socialist thinking". Domenig reported on his first encounter with the Congress Hall: "When visiting the site for the first time, I felt an icy cold creeping over me. The dust of the dead in all rooms, the architectural expression of power – there were only right angles and rectangular axes. I wanted to destroy this power." Domenig died in Graz in 2012.

The Congress Hall

The monumental building designed by architects Ludwig and Franz Ruff was intended to house the Nazi Party's congress centre. The National Socialists used already existing plans devised by Nuremberg's municipal administration for a city hall. Ludwig Ruff managed the preliminary planning stages, always under the overall supervision of Albert Speer. After Ludwig Ruff's death in 1935, his son Franz took over from him. The foundation stone for the Congress Hall was laid in 1935.

The building's exterior is reminiscent of the Coliseum in ancient Rome. The Congress Hall was designed to be about 80 metres high. Today's height is about 40 metres. It was to accommodate 50,000 people in its interior space which was to be spanned by a cantilever roof. The interior space alone is about 180 metres long and about 160 metres wide. The Congress Hall – which was never completed – is one of the largest remaining monumental buildings from the NS era in Germany.



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Award

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In 2004, Günther Domenig was honoured for his design with the City of Nuremberg's Architecture Award.

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