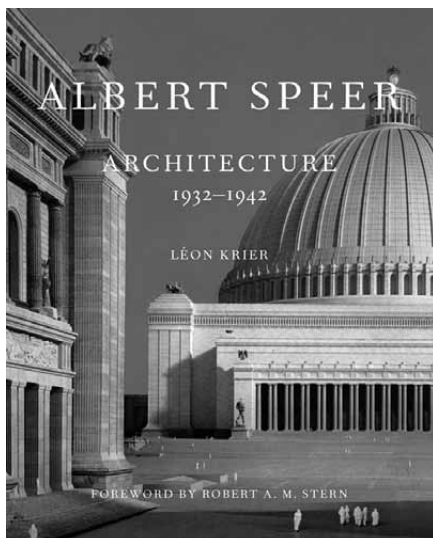*Book review*

BOOK REVIEW OF
LÉON KRIER'S "ALBERT SPEER. ARCHITECTURE 1932–1942"

Samir YOUNÉS

School of Architecture, University of Notre Dame,
110 Bond Hall, Notre Dame, Indiana, 46556, USA
E-mail: samir.younes.1@nd.edu

The most striking commonality between the recent reviews of Léon Krier's *Albert Speer. Architecture 1932–1942*, (Monacelli Press, N.Y., 2013) is that they somehow managed to avoid the book's central premises. These premises derive from three important lines of inquiry: 1) an examination of some of the justificatory claims of architectural modernism and its association with preferred political ideologies, 2) the uses and abuses of architecture for political ends, and 3) the difficult realization that a good architect can also become a war criminal. Yet Krier's lines of inquiry and conclusions are plainly evident in his text and especially in his comparative same-scale drawings of buildings

realized by governments of widely divergent political ideologies during the first four decades of the twentieth century. When the book was first published (by *Les Archives d'architecture Moderne*, Bruxelles, 1985) it provoked widespread condemnation because it contradicted the method used by modernist architects and historians that consists in comparing a selection of classical buildings realized under the most oppressive régimes of the past with a selection of modernist buildings realized under the most tolerant régimes of the present. Krier showed that justifying one preferred architecture by associating it with a preferred political régime, and condemning another architecture by associating it with a reviled political régime, contained several flaws, the most important of which was that the evaluators selectively deployed criteria when it was advantageous to their arguments and selectively withheld these same criteria also to further their own arguments. For if one were to use the same associative criteria with respect to some of the most extolled figures of modernism one cannot but conclude that they worked for or were prepared to work for condemnable political régimes (e.g. Giuseppe Terragni and Fascism in Italy, Mies van der Rohe, and Nazism in Germany, and Le Corbusier and the Vichy government in France). If an architectural character should be praised or condemned by its association with a political ideology, then intellectually honest scholars are expected to consistently adopt this judgment in their work. The modernist embrace of Futurism is a case in point. On the one hand Modernism absorbed most of

Futurism's artistic beliefs such as the vehement break with tradition; the rejection of the continuity of space and time in representation in favor of immediacy and dynamism; the radical belief in the redemption of science and technology; and the cult-like apotheosis of modernity. On the other, modernist architects and historians sought to separate the architecture of futurists from their exaltation of violence and their enthusiastic associations with the rise of Fascism in Italy by scarcely mentioning these extremes or simply remaining silent about them. To associate or dissociate political or artistic content depending on the most advantageous circumstances gravely compromises intellectual integrity and the soundness of architectural judgment. Krier had the courage to oppose the dominant modernist narrative on its own grounds.

The Third Reich's abuse of one of the traditions of classical architecture, one deriving from the nineteenth century academic tradition, was clearly inscribed within a larger program that manipulated all cultural forms, all the visual and rhetorical arts and their symbolism. Its aim was to convince as many unsuspecting minds as possible that the collection of images (as masks) with which the Reich surrounded itself was a direct representation of its political ideology. The deceptive syllogism was: the more attractive the mask, the more appropriate the ideology! In truth, however, all the cultural forms used by the Reich emerged within different and earlier contexts having no relationship to the Reich. This intervention effected a very deep schism between form and content, because if *any* form can be dissociated from its originating context and attached to *any* content, then signifier and signified have collapsed, and the symbolic nature of art or architecture has been rendered dysfunctional. A balcony in Palazzo Venezia does not make for a fascist state, nor does an oval office in the White House make for a democratic state.

Architects and historians have also extended their spurious political associations to materials, as if masonry, wood, iron, steel, or glass, somehow carry political meaning. For decades, going as far back as W. Gropius' Werkbund building of 1914, many architects have insisted on an absurd association: glass, steel, and aluminum are, par excellence, the materials of modernity, of open government and democracy. Take for example the former Reichstag, now Bundestag, in Berlin whose "renovation" was completed in 1999. The building's interior – which had survived in a very damaged state following the bombardment of WWII – was almost completely eviscerated with the exception of the outer walls and a small intervention made in the 1960s. The most visible external part of this "renovation" was a new steel and glass cupola containing an inverted conical structure covered with mirrors. This cupola was recently hailed as a symbol of the transparency of a democratic government. Yet the original cupola that was begun under the reign of Wilhelm I and completed in 1894 under Wilhelm II was also made of iron and glass. In the span of one hundred years, two mostly glass cupolas, admittedly with different articulations, represented empire and then democracy!

Inherent within Krier's critique are implications that go far beyond the architecture built under the Third Reich. His critique touches on an essential part of architecture, namely, how is architectural character endowed with content and where is the ascribed content appropriate or spurious? Architectural character has the capacity to elicit complex associative thoughts and emotions on the part of the observer that go beyond the initial intentions of the architect and the patron. Of these associations and projections, the political vesture has played a significant role in both the understanding as well as the misunderstanding of architectural character. When politics provides the legislative framework for a civic association, it articulates a common *ethos*. When architecture provides the physical framework that shelters the public and private realms, endowing each of them with its own suitable character, it articulates a common *locus*. Understandably, politics and architecture have been linked. After all, both of these arts are called to serve the city. *But it is one thing to state that architecture serves, shelters, and endows with suitable character the various political purposes within the city, be they governmental, mercantile, or cultural, and quite another to claim that architectural qualities represent political content.* The second claim implies that one can pass from judging architectural qualities to the judging of political intentions or vice versa. More explicitly, it suggests that there is an association between the composition of architectural elements and a political content that hovers over the minds of architects and guides their hands.

Now architectural character and political content can certainly be used, misused, and abused. There have been many contentions about their relationship with some architects and historians seeing no relationship whatsoever, and other architects and historians considering architecture as a direct representation of political aims. Much ink and saliva have been spilled on this issue that sharply divided architectural debates in the nineteen seventies and eighties, and it still does. In these decades, the debate concentrated primarily on the associations between politics and architectural character (calling it style), and on historians' use of ideological factors in order to privilege one dominant narrative, one preferred set of architectural forms. This debate,

however, neglected several significant points that are germane to the link between politics and architecture. It did not justify why the citizen politician and the citizen architect are both called to build the city. It did not explain the difference between political freedom of expression and architectural or artistic freedom of expression; nor did it clarify that the confusion of artistic genres is related to the confusion regarding the different kinds of artistic freedom. The clash about these issues seems to have recently receded into the background of architectural exchanges perhaps because far from having resolved this issue the protagonists have temporarily put aside an exhausting argument fraught with intense rancor.

It is important to note that Speer himself, as attested by his *Memoirs*, clearly intended to use his architecture as an expression of the political ideology of the Reich. And yet, in his Preface to *Albert Speer Architecture*, Speer expresses ambivalent if not contradictory opinions about the political role of his architecture. On the one hand, he declares that "…my buildings were not solely intended to express the essence of the National-Socialist movement. They were an integral part of that very movement." On the other, he asserts: "I am not sure that I agree with those critics who assign an ideological content to my architecture… In reality, the means that we used were not founded on ideology but were justified politically – they resulted from the political struggle for power." If his architecture was meant to express the "essence of the National-Socialist movement", then this essence must stand for the content of this architecture, at least in his eyes. But then Speer shifts his discussion from essence to means and he affirms that these means served politics and power. It is important to note then that Krier's critique applies also to Speer' abuse of classical architecture for the political ends of the régime that he served. Krier's detractors usually ignore this aspect of his critique. Krier's detractors also remain silent about his piercingly candid question: what about the other buildings of the Reich which were industrial in their overwhelming majority? Why does the architecture of industry (especially that of armaments) not fall under the same associative scrutiny?

Krier's detractors do not forgive him for having understood that Speer was a good architect before he became a Nazi – before he served Hitler's megalomaniacal intentions.

Speer's ethical failure resided in putting his architectural as well as his organizational talents in the service of the Nazis who also used the multiple talents of sculptors (Arno Breker), film makers (Leni Riefsenthal), and especially scientists (Werner von Braun) and industrialists for their sinister ends. That Speer was a war criminal is self-evident. But Krier calls attention to one of the great paradoxes of the human character: the same individual is capable of being at once an artist and a criminal. The knowledge that art historians, writers, and film-makers have of the violent actions of Caravaggio – which he handled with sanguine dexterity– somehow does not deter them from appreciating his paintings. Krier does not suggest that Speer's architecture should become part of the répertoire of precedents that architects study. Nor does he suggest that in order to study Speer one should separate ethical beliefs and architectural practice. Rather Krier draws attention to the spurious associations between artistic forms, architectural forms and a host of meanings that are external to architecture, such as political content. Since the governments of Washington, New Delhi, Berlin, and Moscow concomitantly used similar forms of classical architecture to represent their different political ends, how could one but conclude that the different political meanings assigned to this architecture are a proof of her political innocence?