One of Adolf Hitler’s most cherished dreams was to build the largest monument ever created. With the guidance of “the chief architect of the Reich,” Albert Speer, he planned to remake Berlin around what he saw as the future core of the Germanic empire: the People’s Hall (Volkshalle), a dome that was to be 290 meters (950 feet) high and able to accommodate 180,000 people. Hitler was so “obsessed” with his gigantic dome, Speer wrote, that he was “deeply irked” when he learned that the Soviet Union had begun constructing an even larger building in Moscow: the Palace of the Soviets. This palace was to be 495 meters (1,624 feet) high and was to be crowned with a huge statue of Lenin. Hitler was furious, for he felt “cheated of the glory of building the tallest monumental structure in the world.” When Hitler ordered the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, Speer realized that “Moscow’s rival building” had preyed on Hitler’s mind “more than he had been willing to admit.” As the German armies advanced toward Moscow, Hitler said: “Now this will be the end of their building once and for all.”

Speer’s memoir Inside the Third Reich, published in 1969 after he served a twenty-year sentence for his role in the Nazi hierarchy, often reads like a self-critical, melancholic confession haunted by guilt. This self-criticism is politically shallow, for Speer is notably silent about the genocide of the European Jews (which he claimed he was unaware of at his trial in Nuremberg) and about his own use of slave labor as Minister of Armaments (a topic he touches upon only in passing). The text is nonetheless an extraordinary document about the core of the Nazi machinery and about Hitler’s bodily, spatial, and architectural sensibilities. The book reveals, in particular, that Hitler viewed in monumental architecture a way of creating in the body a disarming state of awe. He was convinced that monumental buildings were powerful weapons, and assumed that political supremacy depended, as his desire to crush the Palace of the Soviets illustrates, on erecting structures that would dazzle and intimidate multitudes.

Welthauptstadt Germania by Albert Speer (1937-1943)
inhibiting their bodily disposition to act critically and assertively. Efforts to cultivate reverence through monumental buildings have certainly existed for millennia. But Speer’s account reveals the political intricacies of the affective dimensions of monumentality, and the fact that these live in one of the most distinctive affective weapons of capitalism: skyscrapers.

Speer shows that architecture was central to the Nazi project. Furthermore, he demonstrates that architecture was Hitler’s one true passion in life, the only topic that made him joyful, cheerful, and exuberant. Hitler would regularly exclaim, “How much I would have loved to be an architect!” Hitler’s architectural projects went back to the 1920s, when he drew sketches of the Berlin he would rebuild as the capital of a Germanic empire so powerful that its monuments would eclipse in size and splendor those of Rome. In Mein Kampf, he in fact complained that the architecture of German cities lacked monumentality and grandeur. When Hitler met Speer, he was dazzled by how the latter proposed to give material form to his spatial megalomania. The son of a respected architect, Speer became not only “the chief architect” of the Reich but also one of the most trusted members of Hitler’s inner circle, and eventually the Minister of Armaments of the Reich until the fall of Berlin. Hitler expressed a quasi-religious devotion for Speer, whom he admired as the most brilliant architect who had ever lived. As an aide to Hitler once told Speer, “Do you know who you are? You’re Hitler’s unrequited love!”

For Hitler and Speer, architecture was not simply the art of giving form to space; it was the art of creating power through monumental spatial forms. Critical architects such as Eyal Weizman and Léopold Lambert have shown how the manipulation of spatial forms has profound political implications in the control of mobility and visibility and in the deployment of violence. The “Wall of Separation” and the myriad checkpoints built by Israel on Palestinian land (brilliantly examined by Weizman and Lambert) are primary examples of this militarization of architecture. This is why Lambert argues that these are weaponized forms of architecture. Walls and other architectural striations are nonetheless weaponized in a distinctive way, as apparatuses of kinetic capture: that is, as material assemblages that control and channel the movement of bodies in space. The control of mobility via the architectural capture of mobility was certainly central to the spatiality of Nazi Germany, as the confinement of the European Jews within walled ghettos and death camps illustrates. Hitler and Speer, however, were intellectually disinterested in this type of weaponized architecture, which they relegated to lesser functionaries. They were

2 Ibid., 133.
interested, rather, in an architecture weaponized as an apparatus of ‘affective’ capture designed to create what geographer Ben Anderson calls affective atmospheres: spatial environments that exert pre-discursive, not-fully conscious pressures on the body. All architectural forms create affective atmospheres in addition to organizing movement and my distinction between apparatuses of kinetic and affective capture is purely heuristic, and not meant to create a dichotomy or typology. Yet what Speer reveals in Inside the Third Reich is that the main purpose of Hitler’s monumental architecture was to inculcate affective intensities on the bodies contemplating it, capturing their gaze and attention.

The key principle of this affective atmosphere was sheer size. Under the motto “always the biggest,” Hitler wanted to build at a scale previously unseen in the history of empires. As Hitler put it to Speer’s wife, “Your husband is going to erect buildings for me such as have not been created for four thousand years.” Speer admitted that this challenge of messianic proportions “intoxicated” him. In 1936, he published a piece entitled The Führer’s Buildings in which he hailed Hitler’s “brilliance” for conceiving buildings of such a scale that they would last “for eternity.” Taking this principle to heart, Speer engaged on a race to surpass the monumental architecture of prior and rival empires. “I found Hitler’s excitement rising whenever I could show him that at least in size we had ‘beaten’ the other great buildings of history.”

For Hitler and Speer, Nazi Germany’s main architectonic competitors were the Roman, French, and U.S. empires. The People’s Hall (“the greatest assembly hall in the world ever conceived up to that time” and defined by “dimensions of an inflationary sort”) was intended to surpass not only the Roman Pantheon (its inspiration) but also the capitol in Washington DC, which “would have been contained many times in such a mass.” The Nuremberg stadium was to surpass the Circus Maximus in Rome and be able to accommodate 400,000 spectators. In Hamburg, a massive skyscraper would compete with the Empire State Building in New York. The new railroad station of Berlin was designed to surpass New York’s Grand Central Station and Berlin’s Arch of Triumph would have been much bigger than the one commissioned by Napoleon in Paris. Berlin’s main boulevard was to be longer and grander than the Parisian boulevards. Speer explains that “the idea” behind his architecture was straightforward: that people “would be overwhelmed, or rather stunned, by the urban

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5 Speer, Inside the Third Reich, 58.
6 Ibid., 69.
7 Ibid., 68.
scene and thus the power of the Reich.” The idea, in short, was to inculcate in the body what Spinoza called negative affects: that is, affects that decrease the body’s capacity for action by overwhelming it, stunning it, numbing it, making it malleable and, in short, politically passive.

This principle was embodied in one of Speer’s first major projects: the Nuremberg parade grounds built for the 1934 Nazi Party Congress, immortalized by Leni Riefenstahl’s propaganda film *Triumph of the Will*. The monumentality of the classicist architecture of the stadium designed by Speer was inseparable from the militarized discipline of the thousands of troops and Nazi cadres portrayed in the film, forming a solid, geometrical bodily assemblage united in its allegiance to The Fuhrer. If there’s a political ontology inculcated by the affective atmosphere of this architectonic setting it is that of Being-as-One: one people, one nation, one Reich, which Hitler highlighted in his speech in that place, appealing to the “unity” and “obedience” of the German people.

Hitler’s and Speer’s attempt to reach transcendence through monumentality reached such levels that they sought to numb the body even if those buildings were in ruins. The ruins of the Roman empire, which Hitler admired as “imperishable symbols of power,” became the inspiration of what Speer articulated as his “theory of ruins.” His “theory” was that the buildings of the new Berlin should be made of stone and brick (rather than steel and concrete) so that “in a thousand years” their ruins would look imposing, like those of Rome. Hitler, in particular, assumed that Nazi power would endure in those ruins because of their fetish power to continue being an apparatus of affective capture. “Hitler liked to say that the purpose of his building was to transmit its time and its spirit to posterity. Ultimately, all that remained to remind men of the great epochs of history was their monumental architecture, he would philosophize.”

These architectonic fantasies had a notable spatial core: a thirty-meter long, three-dimensional model of the new, monumentalized Berlin that was represented in extreme detail and was dominated by The People’s Hall, the boulevard, and the Arch of Triumph. This miniature “model city” was “Hitler’s favorite project.” Hitler would spend hours observing the details of the model from many different angles, bowing down “to take measure of the different effect.” He wanted to feel how those buildings would affect, for instance, “a traveler emerging from the south station.” He was trying to feel in his own body, in sum, the affective atmosphere that would be created by his architecture once it was built. “These were the rare times when he relinquished his usual stiffness. In no other situation, did I see him so lively, so

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8 Ibid., 134-135.
9 Ibid., 55.
spontaneous, so relaxed.”\textsuperscript{10} Obsessed with architecture as an affective weapon, Hitler was oblivious to urban spatiality. “His passion for building for eternity left him without a spark of interest in traffic arrangement, residential areas, and parks.”\textsuperscript{11} Speer was also blind to living spaces, he admitted in retrospect, and noted that his designs were “lifeless and regimented” and lacked “a sense of proportion.”\textsuperscript{12} When he showed the model city to his father, he was taken aback when the latter (also an architect) simply said, “You’ve all gone completely crazy.”\textsuperscript{13}

The works for the radical refashioning of Berlin began in 1937 but were halted when the war began in September 1939. When in June 1940 Nazi Germany defeated France, Hitler and Speer promptly visited Paris, which together with Rome was the other city they sought to surpass. Hitler admired Haussmann and his aggressive remaking of Paris in the mid-1800s, which had created the city as a bourgeois spectacle (“He regarded Haussmann as the greatest city planner in history, but hoped that I would surpass him”).\textsuperscript{14} They stayed in Paris for only three hours, but visited most of its famous monuments. Hitler wanted to immerse himself in the atmosphere created by Paris’ architecture, and he said, visibly moved, “It was the dream of my life to be permitted to see Paris. I cannot say how happy I am to have that dream fulfilled today.” Paris affected Hitler at a deeper level; it reawakened his passion for a monumentalized Berlin. The same evening he told Speer, “Draw up a decree in my name ordering full-scale resumption of work on the Berlin buildings. […] Wasn’t Paris beautiful? But Berlin must be made far more beautiful.” His order was to proceed with the construction plans “with maximum urgency.”\textsuperscript{15}

Speer was perplexed by the order, given its huge cost amid an ongoing war on multiple fronts. Hitler dismissed these concerns; he was only worried about the potentially negative impact on German public opinion, so the decree was to be kept secret and the works were to be “camouflaged” under other rubrics. Why Hitler’s “urgency”? The way he worded the decree is revealing. Hitler wrote: “I regard the accomplishment of these supremely vital constructive tasks for the Reich as the greatest step in the preservation of our victory.” Accordingly, the decree was officially named: “Decree for the preservation of our victory.”\textsuperscript{16} For Hitler, in other words, the main way to ‘safeguard’ the military victories of 1939-1940 was through the construction of

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 133.  
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 77-79.  
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 134.  
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 133.  
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 75.  
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 173.  
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 173.
imposing buildings. Monumental architecture was for him the most powerful and decisive of all weapons, supremely vital, in fact, to military victory. This is also why Hitler sought to destroy the monumental architecture of his enemies: not only the Palace of the Soviets in Moscow but also the skyscrapers of New York City. As Speer reveals in his second memoirs, *Spandau: The Secret Diaries* (1976), Hitler ordered the development of long-range bombers that could reach New York and destroy its famed skyscrapers, which he saw as key to the global power and prestige of the United States. The program to build these bombers was eventually cancelled, but Speer noted that Hitler fantasized about turning the skyscrapers of New York “into gigantic, burning torches.”

When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, Stalin interrupted the construction of the Palace of the Soviets and ordered that its steel frames were used to build fortifications and other defenses (construction never resumed). Hitler, in contrast, insisted on continuing with the works in Berlin, which by then employed 35,000 workers. In July 1941, a month into the Russian campaign, Speer failed to convince Hitler to stop construction. “He would not hear of any restrictions and refused to divert the material and labor for his private buildings to war industries anymore.” In September 1941, when the advance in Russia was stalling, “Hitler ordered sizable increases in our contracts for granite purchases from Sweden, Norway, and Finland for my big Berlin and Nuremberg buildings.” On November 29, 1941, Hitler dismissed once again Speer’s concerns, and said bluntly, “I am not going to let the war keep me from accomplishing my plans.”

By early December, the German army was facing a catastrophe in Russia due to the winter weather and the destruction of railroad lines. Speer told Hitler that most of the workers employed in Berlin should be urgently assigned to repair railroads in Russia. “Incredibly, it was two weeks before Hitler could bring himself to authorize this. On December 27, 1941, he at last issued the order.” Hitler’s prolonged refusal to divert manpower and resources from the massive buildings in Berlin confirms that he indeed saw them as the powerful fetishes that would “preserve” his early victories. Ironically, this obsession undermined German military might in the early months of the Russian campaign and may have contributed to its long-term defeat. If there was a body enthralled by the atmospheres created by monumental architecture it was that of Hitler himself. By May 1945, Berlin and Nazi Germany had been reduced to rubble.

The affective weaponization of monumental architecture by Nazi Germany is an extreme example of a spatial paradigm that is as old as

18 Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, 185.
empires. Speer’s and Hitler’s monumentality certainly has historically specific and distinctively fascist elements, such as its imitation of Roman and Greek classicism, its explicit celebration of state power, and its particularly delusional, fetishized megalomania. Yet many of its core architectural and affective principles live on in the present. This surfaces in one notable passage in which Speer sought to white-wash Nazi monumentality by referring to the monumentality of the present. After admitting the “chronic megalomania” of his architecture, he wrote that his designs “are not so excessive by present-day standards” when skyscrapers and public buildings all over the world have reached ‘similar proportions.’ Perhaps it was less their size than the way they violated the human scale that made them abnormal.”

Speer appealed to a western audience’s familiarity with skyscrapers as normalized features of the modern world to retroactively present fascist megalomania as “not so excessive.” But in doing so, he actually brought to light that fascist megalomania is comparable to corporate forms of monumentality, and that both can be seen as equally “excessive” apparatuses of affective capture. When Speer argued that the “abnormality” of Nazi architecture was not its “size” but the way it “violated the human scale,” one can easily turn his play of words around and show that current monumentality is equally “abnormal” in its “violation” of “the human scale.” Isn’t the defining goal of monumentality to dwarf “the human scale” and present the body as ‘miniscule?’ Haven’t skyscrapers surpassed in scale and “excess” anything Speer ever dreamed of?

Speer admits that Nazi monumentality was a “nouveau rich architecture of prestige” based on “pure spectacle” and “the urge to demonstrate one’s strength.” He could as well be referring to the skyscrapers that currently define the skyline of New York, Shanghai, or Dubai. Hitler’s obsession to build “bigger” than other empires is easy to pathologize as the delusions of a “madman.” But the competitive zeal to build “bigger” has become a planetary phenomenon. That the tallest skyscrapers in the world are currently in the Persian Gulf and Asia simply replicates what the United States did in the early 1900s when it emerged as an imperial power: “the urge to demonstrate one’s strength.” The architectural face of the authoritarian capitalism of the twenty-first century is embodied in skyscrapers like the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, which at 830 meters (2,722 feet) high seeks to dazzle the bodies contemplating it from the ground while, at the same time, erasing that its phallic structure was built by a quasi-enslaved labor force.

Bruno Latour and other object-oriented ontologists would probably explain the power of monumental buildings to affect the body as resulting from their existence as huge objects (or, in Latour’s words,

19 Ibid., 138 (my emphasis).
20 Ibid., 136-69.
as actants with agency).21 But affective atmospheres are not the outcome of objects alone; they are also a function of the disposition of bodies to be affected by them in a particular way. Not all human bodies, needless to say, are dazzled by monumental architecture and affectively captured by its presence. Huge buildings are certainly more readily noticed, but throughout history many people have disregarded the mandate to be intimidated by their scale. Hitler’s veneration of Roman ruins as transcendental emblems of power, for instance, overlooked that for over a thousand years people in Rome disregarded those ruins as unimpressive piles of rubble, to be readily recycled as construction materials or used as pasture fields.

A notable example of the subversion of the awe-inducing atmosphere cultivated by monumentality took place in the Paris World Fair of 1937. It was there that the monumental architecture of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union competed with each other at close range, for their pavilions faced each other. The Soviet design consisted of two huge human figures standing on a pedestal and charging ahead, as if about to overran the Nazi building. Speer designed the German pavilion, and wrote that he was able to see in Paris a secret sketch of the Soviet monument “striding triumphantly toward the German pavilion.” He decided to erect an enormous counter-monument: a solid, cubic mass “which seemed to be checking this onslaught.” The monument was crowned with an eagle with a swastika in its claws looking on the Soviet sculpture from above, therefore asserting its superiority. Both buildings won the fair’s “gold medal.”22 This “tie” symbolized that Nazi and Soviet architects were committed to similar forms of monumentality, designed to impress. The fact that the bourgeois monumentality of the Eiffel Tower stood a few hundred meters behind, as an equally assertive emblem of power, also reveals that despite their ideological differences all these different monuments were designed as affective weapons intended to create a bodily state of respect.

This is why the true spatial confrontation at the Paris World Fair lay elsewhere, opposing these monuments to the small pavilion of the Spanish Republic, which was then going through a dramatic revolution and civil war. The Spanish pavilion was made up of a modest, two-story building that housed a painting whose affective power was to outlive that of the German and Soviet monuments: the Guernica by Pablo Picasso, which was commissioned for the fair. Capturing the bombing of the Basque town of Guernica by German warplanes fighting for Franco against the Spanish Republic, Picasso’s painting drew multitudes as an emblem of the destruction and suffering created by war and fascism. The atmosphere of fragmentation, mul-


22 Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, 81.
tiplicity, bodily rupture, and negativity created by Picasso stood in opposition to the fantasy of wholeness and totality embodied by the Nazi and Soviet monuments. Whereas the German and Soviet pavilions exuded transcendence, the pavilion of the Spanish Republic exuded the immanence of rubble.

As I argue in Rubble, those who cherish monumentality are inherently hostile to rubble, for they are terrified of rubble’s voiding of positive space.23 Hitler’s and Speer’s celebration of grand “ruins,” it is worth noting, made them feel contempt for (and fear of) “mere rubble.” If monumental architecture stands for Being-as-One (The People’s Hall, The Palace of the Soviets, The Empire State Building, the Burj Khalifa), rubble stands for the opposite: the pure multiplicity of being and therefore, following Badiou’s ontology, the figure of the void. The Guernica’s affective power during the 1937 World Fair was its capacity to immerse the observer in a visual void that was as unsettling as it was generative. Its generative negativity revealed that the huge structures standing nearby were modern-day totems, monuments to hubris built to deflect the destruction that was constitutive of their materiality and that the destiny of all buildings, irrespective of their size, is to be reduced to the assertive nothingness of rubble.

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