



FOLLOWING A FAMILY TRADITION INTO ARCHITECTURE – NOT JUST AFTER HIS NAZI FATHER BUT ALSO OF HIS GRANDFATHER AND GREAT GREAT GRANDFATHER – ALBERT SPEER HAS CARVED HIMSELF A CAREER THAT TOOK OFF FIRST IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND CHINA, BEFORE WINNING PLAUDITS IN GERMANY. CHRIS KANAL SPOKE TO HIM

## PROFILE ALBERT SPEER JR

**'You haven't seen anything until you've sketched it.'** Albert Speer Jr tells me over coffee, but then the architect reveals that he hasn't drawn for a decade. 'I talk architecture,' he says, smiling gently. 'What I have learned is, don't stop thinking too early. You have to think until the solution becomes so simple. I used to tell my students, if you haven't dreamed about the project then you never thought about it.'

Speer was in London for the Olympics. We were sitting on the sun-deck of the MS Deutschland, the German Olympic Committee's base for the Games, docked in the shadow of Canary Wharf. Speer and two partners from his practice Albert Speer and Partners (AS&P) were staying on board. The Deutschland is an über-kitsch setting. The waiters, dressed in whites and silently moving from table to table on the deck, could have walked out of a Berlin kaffeehaus of the Thirties. Onboard it's a riot of mock baroque; Liberace would have felt at home. It was a world away from the icy corporate monoliths that encircled us, and a lot more fun.

Speer was enjoying the Olympics: 'It is crowded, crowded, crowded but marvellous. I was in Beijing and in Munich in '72 but here it's the best.' Speer was in London in his capacity as a member of the German Olympic Committee; as an architect he was impressed by the architecture of the Olympic Park. AS&P is part of the bid for the Qatar

2022 World Cup, and Speer was doing a bit of research too. 'Cities need world events that have a fixed date,' he says. 'Otherwise the normal organisation process falls apart.'

The 77-year old was passionate as he discussed the importance of creating sustainable legacies, where intelligent master-planning is crucial. 'A city is organic, always changing and we have to provide freedom to change,' he asserts.

Seventy six years ago Speer's father, Albert Speer, who was famously/notoriously Adolf Hitler's architect and the Third Reich's armaments minister during the Second World War, was the chief architect for the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. While both father and son have worked on grand scale projects – Speer Jr's work includes the designs of Expo 2000 in Hanover and a grand axis for the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008 – the comparisons stop there.

Since training as an architect in Munich the son has strived to make a name for himself and step out of the shadow cast by his father. 'From the beginning I have always tried to be on my own and to be separate as far as possible,' he says looking into the distance, the water around us blindingly bright in the noon heat. 'In countries like China and Saudi Arabia, nobody knows the history of my father. In Germany, and for the media, it is still in every interview. Still the same questions.' »

Frankfurt-based AS&P is one of Germany's most successful architecture and urban practices, and has had considerable success outside of Europe, particularly in the Middle East and China, where it has had an office in Shanghai since 2001. The 120-strong practice's work is divided 50:50 between architecture and urban design. AS&P was probably one of the first practices to actively embrace green design, way before it got into fashion in the early Eighties. Intelligent, sustainable design is an area where Speer has subsequently carved a name for himself and inspired a subsequent generation of German architects, such as Christoph Ingenhoven, who recently won the commission to build the new Google HQ in the San Francisco Bay area.

'The word sustainability had not been invented back then,' Speer says, a rare smile crossing his face. 'We were the first green architects.' The influential German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* described Speer as the 'green conscience of the industry'. AS&P recently designed 400 'Passivhaus' apartments, which use between five and 10 per cent of the energy of a normal house. 'These are the questions of the future,' asserts Speer, who wrote a book entitled *Die intelligente Stadt* (The intelligent City). 'In Germany the energy price is so high that alternative green power is a necessity.' In the

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Middle East and China though, it's difficult to promote green solutions because energy is subsidised by the governments, he says. 'Ove Arup has done a marvellous job in Dongtan in Shanghai but nothing happens as investors say costs to build it are too high to get the smallest profit. The reason is the energy.'

For the Qatar 2022 World Cup, Speer's chief architect, Karin Bertaloth, designed five stadia which, intriguingly, will use the sun's heat to keep cool. Each stadium will literally sweat. As a master planner Speer is frustrated by the lack of foresight that institutions – from the World Bank, donors and governments – have when it comes to investing in sustainable projects.

'If you are building a city or working on an intelligent project it takes 10 years, and by then everyone involved has left,' he says. 'Reality is focused on individual planning projects that only look at solar energy, only at transportation, only at new urban design. This is not put together into the system. People want clear projects where you can report to your sponsors in two years with a result.'

Speer describes his current role in AS&P as being the 'man in the background'. The practice has eight partners, give of whom are



Left: A prize-winning competition entry for the urban plan of Nanchang, capital of the Jiangxi Province and, with approximately 5 million residents, one of China's growing number of 'middle-sized' cities.

Right (facing): Local sandstone panels serve to articulate the weighty cube-like Criminal Court Complex in Riyadh, symbolising strength and jurisprudence.



Above: A comprehensive remodelling of a former tram depot in Frankfurt am Main introduced 11 townhouses, with a total of 156 apartments, all built to *passivhaus* standards.

Right: The *Lyoner Carée* apartments are part of a concerted change in the Frankfurt cityscape, from office district to residential.

Speer's former students from the University of Kaiserlautern, where he was professor of urban planning for 25 years until 2002. 'They take the decisions now,' he says.

But architecture is in his blood. His great, great grandfather was an architect. His grandfather Albert Friedrich Speer had an architecture practice in Mannheim and many of his art nouveau buildings survive. Born in Berlin, Speer was one of six children. Speer does not like to talk too much about his father. When he does, there is both a palpable sense of unease but also an underlying profound sadness.

Growing up in the Bavarian alpine retreat of Berchtesgaden, right below Hitler's Obersalzberg, Speer hardly saw his father. A year after little Albert was born, his father met Hitler and was tasked with organising the 1934 Nuremberg Rally. Highly impressed with Albert Speer's work, Hitler commissioned him to design and build several buildings including the Reich Chancellery and the Zeppelinfeld stadium in Nuremberg. His neo-classical buildings displayed stark facades, clean lines and columns. It was disquieting architecture on an epic scale, designed to awe but equally intimidate – the entrance to the Reich

Chancellery made visitors look and feel very small. There were also plans to rebuild Berlin as Germania, a new capital for a victorious Third Reich. Albert Speer soon became a part of Hitler's inner circle and a close confidante; in February 1942, he was made minister of armaments. Despite the immense Allied bombing campaign, Speer Sr was able to maintain and exceed German wartime production until the very end. The young Speer was often at Obersalzberg, where he used to watch Mickey Mouse films with Hitler in his private cinema. His memories of Hitler are of a 'distant uncle figure' who liked to give him sweets.

After the war, Albert Speer Sr. was tried and sentenced to 20 years in Spandau Prison for his use of slave labour and crimes against humanity. He was the highest-ranking Nazi to escape the death penalty, in large part due to his remorse and the fact that he deliberately sabotaged Hitler's 'scorched earth' policy, intended to destroy German infrastructure and leave nothing for the Allies. Throughout his post-war life, reasserted in his book *Inside the Third Reich*, Albert Speer Sr. claimed to have no knowledge of the Holocaust.

Following his release in 1966, his father



was unable to re-establish a relationship with his children. By then his son had become an architect. Albert Speer's daughter Hilde, today a prominent politician for the Green Party in Berlin, told historian Gitta Sereny in her book, *Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth* that 'One by one my sister and brothers gave up, there was no communication.' Albert Speer Sr died during a visit to London in 1981.

After his father was sent to Spandau, the Speer family moved to Heidelberg. In the post-war era life for ordinary Germans was very tough. Life for the Speer family was more so. 'This was a very hard time,' Speer Jr recalls.

A shy boy he left school when he was 16. 'I stammered and I couldn't express myself,' he says. His maternal grandfather had a carpentry firm in Heidelberg, and in 1953 Speer took an apprenticeship, and then an exam. 'I constructed a music box,' he says but, raising his eyebrows and smiling again, admits, 'It never worked.'

Speer decided to study architecture in Munich. 'It's an old tradition and I couldn't escape,' he says, laughing. Speer won his first international prize in 1964, and opened his own practice in Frankfurt, focusing mainly >>>

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on residential and redevelopment projects of Old Towns within regional cities like Speyer and Lübeck. Speer's first major project was the Deutsche Zentral-Genossenschaftsbank in Frankfurt.

After his release from Spandau, Speer's father occasionally visited his son at his Frankfurt office. 'He was very curious to see what I was doing,' says Speer. 'But I think he never really understood. It is another kind of thinking, to work not for a dictator but for a democratic government and to influence public discussions and compromise. He didn't understand it.' I ask the son if his father liked his work. He pauses for a few seconds. 'I don't know,' he says. 'He was proud, sure.'

Speer found that because of the family name and history it was difficult to get work in Europe. 'It didn't help,' he tells me, leaning forward. 'I live with it. It's my life. I can't change it.' Speer is clear though that his architecture is not a reaction against his father's.

The young architect looked beyond Europe and what followed was a fruitful period of commissions in architecture and master-planning in the Middle East and China. Of these, the Diplomatic Quarter in Riyadh built at the end of the Seventies was a defining project for the practice. Other projects included an eight-year consultancy to the Algerian government. Speer is fascinated by Middle Eastern cultures (he tells me how, in Saudi Arabia, anyone can petition the king).

In countries like Saudi Arabia, the merging of public and private interests allows for strong partnerships and an really swift development process, from design to realisation. Here business and politics merge, requiring a completely new jargon. Reinier de Graaf, partner at OMA, once described it as

'...a very weird hybrid that is fundamentally based on the non-separation of powers, whereas our whole culture is the opposite in the context of the separation of powers.'

Speer's success has come from the large number of public projects commissioned by governments from Saudi Arabia to China, ones which openly use architecture as a means to articulate their nation's ambitions. Coming from a country extremely sensitive to its relationship with autocratic regimes, Speer has no unease about this. 'It's is a discussion that has been going on Germany for many years,' he asserts. For Speer, Europeans don't have the right to dictate what government others should have, democratic or otherwise.

'German democracy is very young,' he adds. 'My opinion is we have to be very – I don't know what the English word is – bescheiden ('modest'). Saudi Arabia is a Bedouin country. Chinese culture is 5,000 years old. I don't think Germans should go there as a prophet or a teacher and tell them how to do things.'

Speer views work the work of AS&P in countries such as China as a form of knowledge transfer that will allow the new generation of Chinese architects and urban planners to avoid the mistakes made in the past in the West. He tells me that out of the Riyadh DQ project, a think tank was formed for all strategic projects in the country related to urban planning. It is still running. He believes other architects overestimate the influence that they have on institutions and society abroad.

The Arab Spring that has rocked the Middle East over the course of the past year is on Speer's mind. AS&P is working on two master-planning projects in Egypt: the '6th October City' urban renewal project in Cairo and another in Alexandria.

*Above: As draftsmen, Albert Speer Sr and Adolf Hitler shared disciplinary interests; here they look over some plans at the Obersalzberg retreat in 1938*

'Everyone is sitting and waiting,' he says of the government ministries that he works with. 'People are afraid to stand up and say something because they might sit back down and there is no longer a seat there.'

Speer's architecture can be characterised by its simplicity, pragmatism and sense of understatement. 'Architecture is one part art, but it also has to function and be economical,' he says. Speer has little time for projects that are simply for prestige.

For example he doesn't like Renzo Piano's Shard. 'This building from the 30th floor upwards is hardly sustainable in terms of floor space,' he says, adding that the site in Southwark is a historical area where skyscrapers have no place. He compares it to the Burj Khalifa in Dubai. 'A marvellous building,' he enthuses before adding. 'It's unnecessary and society doesn't need it.' However, Speer does love the work of IM Pei, particularly the Museum of Islamic Art in Qatar, pronouncing it: 'One of the loveliest and most intelligent buildings in the world that plays with modernism and Islamism.'

Following the demolition in 2007 of the Palast der Republik, the former GDR parliament building in Berlin, there are now plans to rebuild a 19th-century style baroque castle, the Hohenzollern Stadtschloss, on the site. It has become a focal point for debate in Germany over what many see as the Disneyfication of history and an unhealthy nostalgia for the past.

It's hard to find anyone in Berlin who is in favour of it. 'I am against rebuilding history if nothing was left,' says Speer, rising up from the seat to return to his cabin. 'It is no use playing Don Quixote,' he says with a laugh, before stopping for a moment. Speer glances ahead to the silver skyscrapers of Canary Wharf, transfigured by sunlight: 'When it's gone, it's gone'... ■