Thingstätten

Katharina Bosse
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Katharina Bosse

Between 1933 and 1936 many ideologically motivated open-air theaters, known as **Thingstätte** (literally, "thing sites") were built in Germany. German history was the theme of the pieces (**Thingspiele**, or Thing plays), performed there, but these stages were also used for Nazi rallies or ceremonies, serving to present the **Volksgemeinschaft**'s (the "people's society") image of itself. Little is known about this attempt to create a type of propagandist theater through architecture, although much architectural evidence remains to this day. —— These stages were special, particularly as far as design and location are concerned. They reference the historical Nordic-Germanic **Thingplätze**, even though they had nothing in common, either geographically or in terms of meaning. The word **Thingstätte** was a political appropriation intended to create "instant historicity." These new ceremonial sites, erected all over the Third Reich, used traditional ancient building materials, were located in impressive spots, and, very importantly, they were exposed to the elements. Sixty of the planned four hundred complexes were built with the help of the **Reichsarbeitsdienst** (Reich Labor Service). Today, between forty and fifty of them can be found scattered across Germany, Poland, and Russia.[1] —— The number of bit-players and audience members was overwhelming, but not sustainable. In late 1935, the National Socialists distanced themselves from the concept of the **Thingstätte** per se, as well as the term, and turned toward other media.

Today, **Thingstätte** are subdivided into the following categories:

1. Famous, modern open-air theaters such as the Loreley Bühne, the Karl May Festspiele in Bad Segeberg, or the Waldbühne in Berlin.
2. Facilities that are either fully or partially intact and protected by historical preservation rules (Heidelberg, St Annaberg, Vogelsang).
3. Ruins of **Thingstätten**, whose remaining stones or floor plans are still visible (Brunswick, Bad Schmiedeberg, Bielefeld).
4. **Thingstätte** that have been built over (Koblenz).

1 This list is not exact, and the number should be higher, since many of the regional initiatives supporting the construction of **Thingplätze** are hardly known today, and therefore there is no complete list. For an extensive registry, including many architectural plans and designs, see Rainer Stommer, **Die inszenierte Volksgemeinschaft** (Weimar: Jonas Verlag, 1985).

Thingstätte represent a time period—the early years of enthusiasm for Hitler—that is difficult to understand today, partly because the period was long blanketed by silence. When I stand before the architecture, it mutely challenges me to find out more about its history.

There are both historical and contemporary dimensions to the **Thingstätte**. Their contemporary significance results, for instance, from the fact that many of them function today as open-air theaters where the Rolling Stones or the Wattenscheid Shanty Choir perform. Secondly, they are sightseeing destinations that lead to hiking paths or mountain bike routes, and their beautiful locations in nature ensure that they are spaces where people can have interesting experiences. Third, some are literally overgrown, remnants of the past that people seek out, not only in books but in places as well. In the area that I live in, I can go up the mountain with my pug and my camera, feel the drizzling rain, and find the ruins of Nazi architecture, blasted stone, or places where the land has been typically rounded and leveled. They allow history to be experienced up close.

I began developing **Thingstätten** as an interdisciplinary art project in 2012 by questioning modern art practices in this era of fast-paced, social, online communities—especially the importance of collectives and the relationship between platform and content. Another concern was the notion of national identity, and for me, the German one in particular. —— For most of the national and international artists I approached, the subject of **Thingstätte** was completely new. They created work specifically for this project. Many worked on site at some of the 45 **Thingstätte** presented in this book. The motivations for participating in this diverse group of different ages, nationalities and genders ranged from biographical concepts to the pleasures of exploring the unknown. All of them related in some way to the poignant architectural design and its contemporary meaning.

The artworks are categorized as either “documentary” or “fine arts.” The term “documentary photography” (white pages) is used broadly; it encompasses diverse artistic approaches, but the pictures still serve as evidence of the actual sites, meaning that nothing is physically added or subtracted. —— The "fine art projects" (grey pages) are in the fields of performance, installation, and illustration. Some are staged, while others refer to the sites in an abstract manner. Images are grouped by location and supplemented by historical visual material. —— The coexistence of various sources offers much room for the thoughts of a democratic collective, an expression of individuality in the midst of community.

The Pluralist Collective

Understanding totalitarian National Socialism is a difficult proposition. As eyewitnesses to the period die, I see an important connection to knowledge about the Nazi era fading away. Concerning the processes that were required in order to work through the injustices, to break the silence, much was hindered by the misleading concept of “comradeship” and the suppression prevalent during the post-war era.[2] —— Yet, there is also a different kind of energy, which comes from international cooperation. As an art project, **Thingstätten** is mainly a coordinated volunteer effort. Participants not only gave their time and energy, but also usually paid for their own meals and production costs. “We are travelers on a mission of our own. We all have debts we don’t think about. We think in images …”

The **Thingstätten** project was set up to be interdisciplinary and pluralist. Its concept of multiple voices opposes the fascist idea of uniformity. I reject the notion of an intractable, authoritative interpretation; history, architecture, politics, art, culture, theater, language, performance, documentary photography, video, conceptual photography—all these genres produce contributions that stand together on an equal footing. The result is a catalogue of the **Thingstätte**, which functions as a standard reference work. At the same time, however, the fact that there are multiple voices involved in this project allows us to question this predefined system of communicating information. Individual **Thingstätte** can be likened to intersections where the perspectives of different artistic or historical studies overlap. **Thingstätte** are sequenced in the book using an artistic classification method, not a scientific one. The resulting “visual sound” is composed of multiple visual sources, color and composition, information and abstraction, and either an emotional or a neutral gaze. Fine artworks alternate with documentary photos; atmospheric interpretations stand next to ones of forensic neutrality. As a rule, we tried to avoid exaggerating the architecture through photography; for example, we decided against enlarging the historic postcards, as they were essentially originally meant to be advertisements. The images were selected by a team from the photo editing class at the **Ostkreuzschule**, under the direction of Nadja Masri.

For a contemporary approach to artistic and scientific research, the notions of the platform and the collective are intriguing. Just as the creation of the historical **Thingstätte** was less centrally guided than you might think at first, the **Thingstätten** project also grew out of the commitment of the individual artists and historians I approached. Basically, all of the texts and projects were completed by individuals who voluntarily took responsibility for carrying out the work, although I helped

2 In 2016, I had the opportunity to hear the eyewitness testimony of survivors who had traveled from far and wide to testify at the trial of the former SS sergeant Reinhold Hanning in Detmold. It was gripping and shocking to hear their experiences up close.

organize the international artists and worked with each team on site whenever and wherever possible. Again and again, individuals and groups working on this project gathered at various **Thingstätte** in order to shape their works. The results are not limited to the book. They also include an open platform and archive: the website **www.thingstaetten.info**, where future researchers, artists, and "citizen scientists" can find and share material for their work.

The historical and present-day meaning of the **Thingstätte** cannot be separated from the context of the totalitarian state. It represents a convolute of architecture and culture, theater and language, a way of presenting an image of the "Aryan people". It is a propaganda event, a combination of modernity and an imaginary Germanic history, the yearning for "German origins," which people tried to define within their own framework (and which never actually existed). The context included job-creation schemes and the presentation of all of the above through architecture, the appropriation (and propagandist application) of the word **Thingstätte**, the appropriation and re-shaping of young people's communal experiences in nature, the solstice celebrations staged by youth groups, the creation of jobs for actors, a chance to outshine the neighboring towns, to serve the new regime, to receive economic support, and much more. None of these things functioned alone, as individual measures; rather, they all operated within the totalitarian system of National Socialism, which touched every area of life.[3]

The abrupt end of the **Thing** movement in 1936 also meant failure, a defeat right from the start, a loss of meaning, the brief lifespan of an idea. It was a large-scale action that lasted only two years in the thousand-year Reich.

The years 1933 to 1936 were the years of terror inflicted by the SA's storm troopers, of forcible political conformity, and of systematic persecution and exclusion; this is when the switch was flipped, and the population was taught to either accept or assist in the destruction of the Jews.[4]

Architecture

Thing was a theater movement, yet it is astonishing that the architecture was far more impressive than the plays. Is it no longer possible these days to imagine the attraction of those performances? Expert critique of the original performances was indeed subdued, however, despite support from the Ministry of Propaganda.

Thing theater was first reinvented in space, and only afterward in language. A group of architects produced models and drawings, creating a "genre" with strongly repetitive characteristics that were applied to the buildings erected. —— Erasing the separation between audience and actors was important to the activists of the **Thing** movement. Modeled after ancient amphitheaters, the stage curved into the auditorium, which in turn enclosed it on the sides, pushing the levels of the playing space and the watching space into each other. The typical German amphitheater of 1933 had a stage split into three parts, and a rounded auditorium with wide stairs slicing through it. The stage was not separated by a curtain. Instead, the actors moved through the audience at the beginning or during the show. The choir, made up of a large number of amateur performers (including SA troops or the laborers who had built the **Thingstätte**), required choreography of its own, so that its full effect could unfurl in these large facilities. Often there was a kind of parade ground in front of the **Thingstätte**, so that it could be entered in an orderly formation. Memorials to those who fell in World War I were frequent additions, reinforcing the solemnity of the architecture.

Why was a form of theater, whose name (**Thingstätte**) propagated an imaginary origin myth (according to a genetic study published in 2007, only one in six German men and one in ten German women are of actual Germanic ancestry), given an amphitheater? The circular shape creates a sense of unity, as anyone who has done "the wave" during a home team game can attest to. The visual rhythm of the architecture, along with the sheer numbers of actors were supposed to overcome the

3 "Yes, really, it takes naive simplemindedness to still believe that one could separate any random measure taken by the regime out of its context, to admire or imitate it by itself … Can't we see that this order is plainly the brutal and militaristic suppression of any free expression of the contrasting opposites that still make up the actual reality of what constitutes the 'social'?" wrote the Swiss author Denis de Rougemont, who lived for a while in Germany, and whose **Journal aus Deutschland 1935–1936** (Vienna: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 1998) was first published in 1938 by Gallimard in Paris.

4 Sebastian Haffner describes this radical social change: "Four weeks later I was wearing jackboots and a uniform with a swastika armband, and spent many hours of the day marching in a uniformed column around Jüterborg and its surroundings, singing in a choir with everyone else 'Siehst du im Osten das Morgenrot' or 'Märkische Heide' and other marching songs. We also had a flag—a swastika flag, of course—and occasionally this flag was carried in front of us, and when we went through a village, people to the right and left lifted their hands high or quickly ducked into a building entrance. They did this because they had learned that we—meaning I—would beat them up if they didn't do this. It didn't matter one bit that I—and others of us—would also flee into a building entry to get away from this flag, when we weren't being made to march behind it." **Sebastian Haffner, Geschichte eines Deutschen – Die Erinnerungen 1914–1933** (Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2000; 2nd edition: Munich: Pantheon 2014).

separation between the audience and the stage. The audience was told to follow events "reverently," to behave as if they were participating in a worship service, and hence not to applaud, use opera glasses, or otherwise act like an "audience."

The Ascent

The path to the **Thingstätte** separated the "Aryan people's society" from the colorfully mixed urban population. Travel to these places was taken into consideration; the construction of new train stations and streets was part of the planning. Nevertheless, from today's perspective, the **Thingstätte** were still located far from public buses and trains, as if the ascent were already a criterion for selection. The way up, marching together, began the play. The axes of the streets leading up to the **Thingstätten** were designed to impress.

A **Thingstätte** is not a theater; nature replaces the stage set, not only in sensory terms, but also in terms of symbolism (the German Forest, trees like an army, et cetera). The mountains or views of the valley became part of a **Thingstätte's** aesthetics; with their natural stones and timeless formal vocabulary, the **Thingstätte** looked as if they had always been there. The view from a **Thingstätte**, across the mountains and valleys, is beautiful—although less so today, because our knowledge about the context (the unpopular memorial) and the growth of new trees have narrowed the prospect.

The overwhelming number of uniform designs during the planning phase[5] at the start makes the **Thing** movement seem far more cohesive and controlled than it actually was. Joining the amphitheaters were open-air stages from the 1920s, redesigned with Nazi symbols; squares without stages; or simple sites where, for instance, mystical boulders were arranged. During the development phase, insufficient thought was given to construction components or problems with the sites, so that complications arose during construction, despite the building tempo, which was rapid from today's standpoint.

Over the course of the research, my view expanded beyond theater history. While collecting old postcards I kept finding **Thingplätze** that embodied Nazi ideology and were suited for parades and commemorative ceremonies, but not for plays. Also, new **Thingplätze** kept appearing in nearly every municipality; it seemed that an existing site could be quickly expanded and christened a **Thingplatz**, only to be renamed or remodeled even before the end of the war, the swastika removed. There are few traces of these **Thingplätze** today; they might be found if sought for (and I encourage readers to do so): an old postcard, a newspaper clipping announcing a dedication ceremony, a request for construction approval, or a photograph owned by a private person. Many cities destroyed files from the years 1933 to 1945. If one happens to discover the (partially) surviving remains of **Thingstätte** architecture today, it is difficult to figure out what they are, without any further information. For many years they were not marked by signs, although a few communities have put them up in recent years. How to deal in a more open and informative way with these memorials to the "architectural rear guard"[6] and its traces will be an important question in the future.[7] This project began the work of creating a network of (occasionally volunteer) researchers and supporting their commitment to documenting the sites.

Although I began my research with a centrally controlled plan from the Ministry of Propaganda, many visits to sites gradually produced a picture of a movement strongly influenced by regional interests and initiatives that were less concerned about reforming the theater than they were about economic and local political interests. Construction requests were not only made through the ministry's building program but were also approved and financed on local levels. In this sense, the **Thingstätte** are literally "National Socialism made in stone," to paraphrase Joseph Goebbels. They were located in communities whose leaders supported the new regime early on, with a zest for action. They were volunteers, not forced by terrorism and repression. Thus, historically, the **Thingstätte** represent an agreement with the politics of the Nazi era. Here, too, a shift is taking place. Regardless of the fact that we can ascribe a unique creative achievement to the **Thingstätte**, they also represent a policy aimed at destroying artistic, intellectual, and cultural life in Germany. As part of the culture of propaganda, they are stone testaments to the development of "normal citizens" into a society that supported and perpetrated crimes against humanity. The way of dealing of the past, the silence about it, and the resulting lack of knowledge are also part of German identity today.

5 For a description of the architectural work group, see Evelyn Annuß, **Volksschule des Theaters** (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2019), pp. 182ff. In 2014, the artist Simon Schubert reacted to this type of architecture with his two pieces **Thingstätte in der Ebene** and **Thingstätte in der Stadt**.

6 Ralf Meyer, **Architektonische Nachhut: Hinterlassenschaften des Nationalsozialismus**, with texts by Günter Kunert and Werner Durth (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2007).

7 "Gerhard Kaldewei zur Problematik von Informationsangeboten in 'Geschichte im Nordwesten – Folge 11: NS-Kultstätten,'" www.youtube.com/watch?v=NALhj1XghL4&feature=youtu.be, starting at 9 min., 30 sec. (accessed January 6, 2020).

There are various reasons why the **Thing** movement failed. In politics there was a reorientation after the "first phase" of National Socialism; for the adherents of the **Thingstätte** movement there was the death of Otto Laubinger;[8] and for the architects, there were even bigger plans afoot: enormous stadiums, such as the Olympic stadium in Berlin, or the "largest stadium in the world" in Nuremberg, meant to hold 400,000.[9] —— The ambitious, avant-garde **Thing** architecture required the authors and directors of **Thingspiele** to have scenic and choreographic knowledge that they did not necessarily have.[10] After the charm of novelty wore off, their spark never succeeded in setting the critics or the audiences on fire.

Nazi propaganda increasingly separated itself from the mysticism of Germanic cults, in order to come across as modern and future oriented in an international context. After Goebbels banned the term **Thing** in October 1935, the **Thingstätte** were renamed **Weihestätte** (ceremonial site), **Feierstätte** (ceremonial site), or simply **Freilichtbühne** (open-air stage). Despite the taboo, the word **Thing** held its own in some areas. As late as 1938, the Hitler Youth celebrated a **Jugendthing** (Youth Thing) in Bad Segeberg, and even in post-war Germany, the word never completely disappeared.[11] Currently, right-wing radicals present **Jugendthings** and organize an Internet platform called the **Thing-Netz**.[12] —— The concept of the **Thingplatz** is familiar from historic Germanic sites and is an accepted term for "gathering place" in northern Germany. In some towns, therefore, a traditional street name is **Am Thingplatz** (At the Thingplatz).

8 Otto Laubinger was president of the Reichstheaterkammer (Reich Theater Committee) from 1933 to 1935.

9 For more on the prototype for this gigantic project in the Palatinate: www.spiegel.de/geschichte/hitlers-versuchstribuenen-fuer-das-deutsche-stadion-a-947711.html (accessed November 28, 2019).

10 Annuß 2019, pp. 246ff. Evelyn Annuß, **Volksschule des Theaters** (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2019).

11 In the 1970s there was a **Thingstätte** on the moor near Hille in Westphalia, but there was no evidence that it was connected to Nazi ideology.

12 "The only other example that will be named here is the Thing-Netz, an electronic information system (mailbox system) used by right-wing extremists and others to announce upcoming events." www.bpb.de/politik/extremismus/rechtsextremismus/41446/die-sprache-des-rechtsextremismus?p=all (accessed November 28, 2019).