

Lars Olof Larsson

## Merry Town Planning (*Fröhliche Neugestaltung*): Humorous Comments on the Reshaping of Berlin during the Nazi Period

Keywords: Albert Speer, Berlin plan, caricature, *Fröhliche Neugestaltung*, Hans Stephan, town planning, 'New Berlin'.

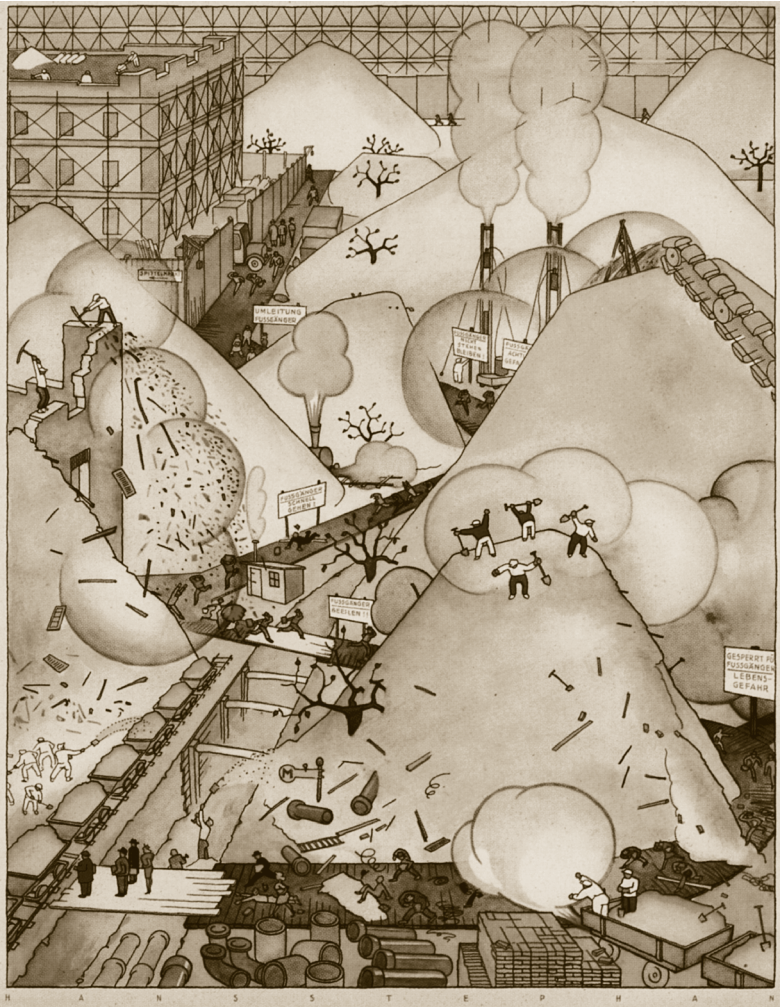
The purpose of this paper is to present a cycle of satirical drawings by the German architect Hans Stephan (1902–1973), created during the years around 1940 and collected under the title *Fröhliche Neugestaltung* (approximately Merry Town Planning). As long as the war lasted, the drawings remained unpublished, although they certainly circulated among Stephan's colleagues. The existence of slides of some of the drawings suggests that he also showed them in his frequent lectures in Germany and abroad. After the war, some of them were published in an article on Hans Stephan in the journal *Bauwelt* in 1956 in order to prove Stephan's critical attitude towards the Nazi regime, and in 1978 a larger choice were included in my book on Albert Speer and the reshaping of Berlin.<sup>1</sup> In 2005, I discussed the vacillating character of the satirical message of the drawings in a conference paper.<sup>2</sup> Only in 2008, however, was the whole cycle (14 drawings) published and critically analysed.<sup>3</sup>

The original drawings seem to be lost, but there exist two sets of black and white photographs of the whole cycle, and a coloured offset

<sup>1</sup> H. Schoszberger in *Bauwelt*, vol. 50, 1956, pp. 1192–1194; L.O. Larsson, *Die Neugestaltung der Reichshauptstadt*, *Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis. Stockholm Studies in History of Art*, vol. 29, Stockholm and Hatje Verlag, Ostfildern 1978.

<sup>2</sup> L.O. Larsson, *Affirmative Satire? Humoristische Zeichnungen zu Albert Speers Neugestaltungsplan für Berlin*, *Neue Staaten – neue Bilder? Visuelle Kultur im Dienst staatlicher Selbstdarstellung in Zentral- und Osteuropa seit 1918*, A. Bartetzky et al. (ed.), Köln, 2005, pp. 159–160.

<sup>3</sup> L.O. Larsson, S. Larsson and I. Lamprecht, *'Fröhliche Neugestaltung' oder die Gigantoplanie von Berlin 1937–1943. Albert Speers Generalbebauungsplan im Spiegel satirischer Zeichnungen von Hans Stephan*, Kiel, 2008.



1. Hans Stephan. *When Work has Begun, Pedestrians will have a Hard Time!* (*Wenn es losgeht, haben die Fußgänger nichts zu lachen!*) from the collection of satirical drawings *Fröhliche Neugestaltung*. Before 1940

print of one of the sheets (Fig. 1). The existence of this print, which can be dated to slightly before 1940, raises the question for what audience the drawings were originally intended. Did Hans Stephan plan a publication, and could that have been possible at that time? Probably not.



2. Hans Stephan. Hermann Jansen as John the Baptist. 1939



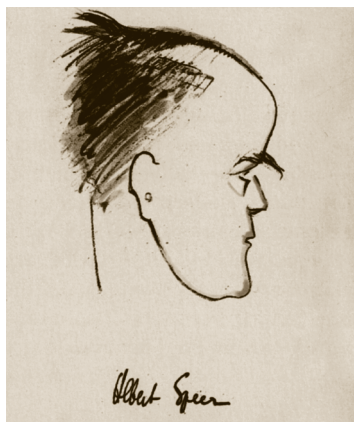
3. Hans Stephan. Albert Speer's knights: Hans Stephan, Rudolf Wolters and Willi Schelkes. 1942

Maybe the print was only meant to be circulated among architect friends and colleagues. But even so, the drawings were to some degree public, and the question remains under what circumstances a satirical treatment of a major state project like the reshaping of the capital was possible. I will return to this problem at the end of my paper.

Who was Hans Stephan? He studied architecture at the Technische Hochschule in Berlin, his most important teacher being the famous town planner Herrmann Jansen (1869–1945). Subsequently, he was employed by the City of Berlin. In 1937, Hans Stephan joined the staff of the Generalbauinspektor für die Neugestaltung der Reichshauptstadt (GBI), under Albert Speer (1905–1981), as a town planning specialist, familiar with the problems of the capital. Hans Stephan was one of three department directors of the planning office of the GBI, in charge, among other things, of transport and housing. But as the satirical drawings prove, he was also a very gifted draughtsman. Albert Speer recognised his skill in this field,

and sometimes asked him for drawings on special occasions like birthdays. On the occasion of Herrmann Jansen's 70th birthday, Stephan represented his teacher as John the Baptist, that is, as a prophet of town planning announcing the appearance of a Messiah (Fig. 2). The small figures in the background carrying a long spear reveal that Albert Speer was considered to be the Messiah (*Speer* in German meaning 'spear')!

A drawing of three knights (Fig. 3) is a tribute to Speer himself on the occasion of his 40th birthday. The knights, kneeling on a model of the central part of the Berlin plan with the Great Hall clearly visible, represent the directors of the planning department, from left to right, Hans Stephan himself, Rudolf Wolters (1903–1983), and the garden architect Willi Schelkes (b. 1904). Here too, a spear refers to Speer; the leaflets pierced on it allude to episodes and triumphs in his successful career. The gramophones on the skirt of Stephan's harness allude to his role as a lecturer; the oak leaves on Schelkes' coat distinguish the garden architect; and the champagne bottle on Wolters' back hints at his fondness for alcoholic delights.



4. Hans Stephan. A caricature of Albert Speer. 1940s

Stephan also drew several more or less caricaturising portraits of Speer himself (Fig. 4), and of colleagues at the GBI. One of the most interesting is his emblematic representation of Ernst Neufert, the internationally famous expert on

standardisation and building practice (1900–1986) (Fig. 5). During the wartime planning of large residential quarters, Neufert became one of the most important members of Speer's staff. Stephan's drawing makes a pun on his name, Neufert being turned into 'Neu-Pferd', that is, 'New Horse'.

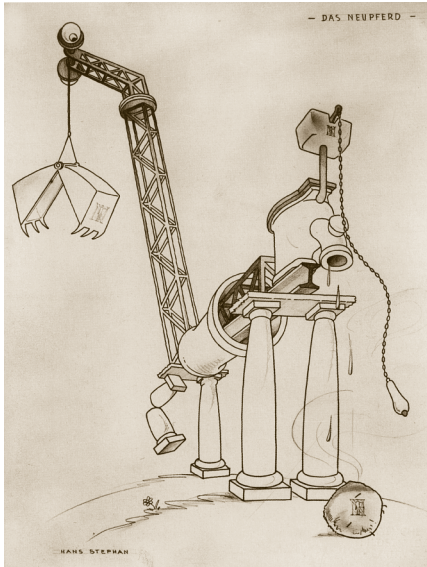
These drawings reveal the jocular manner prevailing among the young architects around Speer. Considering the sinister political background, to us, such a light-hearted mood at the very heart of Nazi power in Berlin around 1940 of course seems more than objectionable. But these young men, living in a very privileged professional position, were



all workaholics, possessed with the supposed importance of their mission, and an optimistic belief in the future. They were all loyal to the regime, without being ardent National Socialists, and obviously neither very critical nor even interested in the inhuman things going on around them.

As is well known, the reshaping of Berlin into the monumental capital of the Third Reich was a project of the greatest importance to Hitler. As a matter of fact, he not only considered himself the *spiritus rector* of the project, but also contributed sketches of his own for the two key buildings, the Great Hall (Grosse Halle), and a huge triumphal arch, for the architect in charge of the construction of these buildings, Albert Speer, to follow.

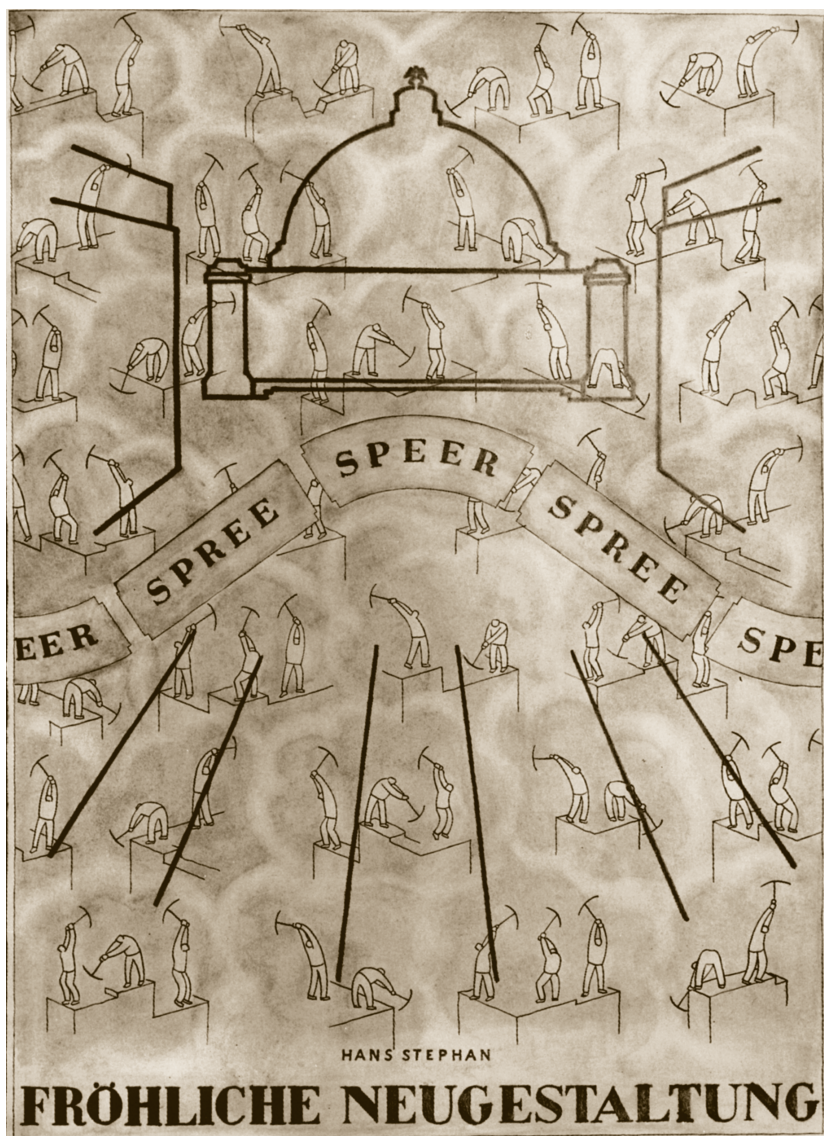
The main elements of the Berlin plan were two broad street axes, running from west to east and from north to south, dividing the city into four equally large parts, and crossing each other in front of the Brandenburger Tor; and, complementary to that, a system of circular streets and highways connecting the cross-axes and surrounding the city.



5. Hans Stephan. A caricature of Ernst Neufert. 1940s

The central part of the southern axis was the most monumental piece of

the plan, dominated by huge buildings. It was intended to replace Unter den Linden as a parade street. Beginning at a large railway station to be built at the height of the Tempelhof airport, passing a huge triumphal arch placed at the highest point in the area, and ending at the Great Hall to be built to the north of the former Königsplatz, just between the Reichstagsgebäude and the present Hauptbahnhof (Central Station), this heart of the new centre should, by its enormous dimensions, have outdone by far its prototypes, the Champs Elysées in Paris and the Ringstrasse in Vienna. This part of the southern axis demanded the clearance



6. Hans Stephan. The cover of the collection of satirical drawings *Fröhliche Neugestaltung*, 1940s

of large high-quality residential areas, including several embassies. Demolition work started as early as 1938, but progressed only slowly because of the protests from the population and due to the problem of finding new apartments for all those who had to leave their homes.

The western axis was an extension of Unter den Linden beyond the Brandenburger Tor, through the Tiergarten and Charlottenburg, ending to the west of the Olympic stadium. This was the easiest part to realise, because the existing streets were generally both straight and broad enough to match the new standards. The most spectacular element within this project was the translocation of the Siegessäule from its original position in front of the Reichstag building to its present location on a large circular street junction in the Tiergarten, the Grosser Stern. Here it still serves as a monumental *point de vue*. Work on the western axis started in 1938 under the supervision of Hans Stephan. On 30 April 1939, ten days after Hitler's 50th birthday, its central part opened.

The earliest of the satirical drawings dates from around 1937, that is, from the beginning of the planning of the 'New Berlin'. During the winter of 1942–1943, Stephan seems to have given up the project. Under the impression of the devastating bombing raids on Berlin, any idea of humorous comments upon the 'merry reshaping' of the city was ruled out.

The cover of the cycle (Fig. 6) shows a crowd of workers busy demolishing old houses in order to make way for the new city. Simple but vigorously drawn outlines represent the Great Hall and the bend in the River Spree. At the top of the bend, the name of the river is changed into 'Speer'. This is, of course, a simple panegyric with no satirical message. Besides flattering Speer, the drawing repeats a popular theme in the propaganda of all political systems: the new state tears down old and obsolete dwellings to replace them with new, beautiful and modern houses for the benefit of the people and as a symbol of political regeneration. Without any doubt, this is how Hans Stephan and his architect colleagues involved in the Berlin project looked upon their task.

Other drawings, like *Removal of the Siegessäule (Umzug der Siegessäule)* (Fig. 7), are amusing and without any satirical edge. But some drawings are less harmless.



7. Hans Stephan. *Removal of the Siegessäule (Umszug der Siegessäule)*. 1940s

Two sheets, *When Work has Begun, Pedestrians will Have a Hard Time!* (*Wenn es losgeht, haben die Fußgänger nichts zu lachen!*) (Fig. 1) and *The Large Axis is Shot Clear* (*Die große Achsenstraße wird durchgeschossen*) (Fig. 8), were inspired by the extensive, and among the inhabitants of Berlin very unpopular, demolition campaign in the area south of the Tiergarten and near Potsdamer Platz. There, hundreds of rather noble living quarters and two important railway stations (the Potsdamer and the Anhalter stations) had to give way to the southern axis.

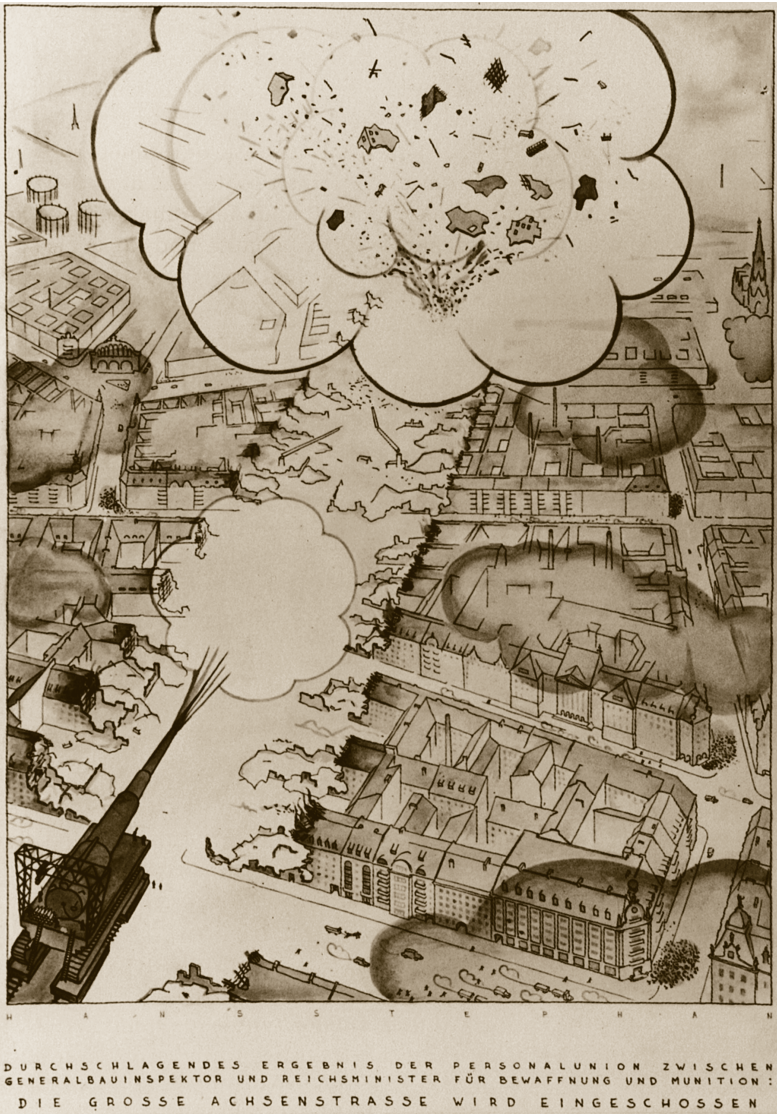
In *When Work has Begun ...* the scene is depicted from the perspective of 'the simple man in the street'. For him, the reshaping of the capital is just a great nuisance. But the everyday torment caused by the work is looked upon through the eye

of a humorist. The drawing is full of amusing details, irritating inconveniences and calamities. However, the sense of the project is, of course, not questioned; on the contrary, in spite of all the inconvenience it causes, the artist cannot conceal his admiration for the great enterprise.

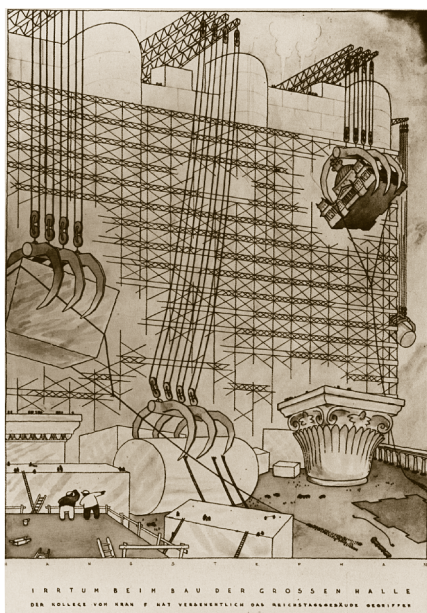
*The Large Axis is Shot Clear* was inspired by Albert Speer becoming minister of armaments in February 1942. Frustrated by the great practical, legal and administrative difficulties caused by the demolition of thousands of living quarters in the city, the architects in charge of the project were obviously dreaming of a radical solution.<sup>4</sup> To us, it might be tempting to interpret this as an expression of a specific brutality fostered

<sup>4</sup> The connection between the demolition of residential quarters and the persecution of the Jewish population is described in Larsson *et al.* 2008, p. 36ff. In order to organise adequate living quarters for all those who had to leave their apartments, Berlin Jews were ejected from their flats and forced to live in smaller tenements, until their deportation started.





8. Hans Stephan. *The Large Axis is Shot Clear* (*Die große Achsenstraße wird durchgeschossen*). 1942



9. Hans Stephan. *The Great Hall (Irrtum beim Bau der Großen Halle)*. 1940s

by the Nazi regime. This, however, would certainly be ignoring the radicalism common to most modernist town planning architects in any country during those years and even after the Second World War.

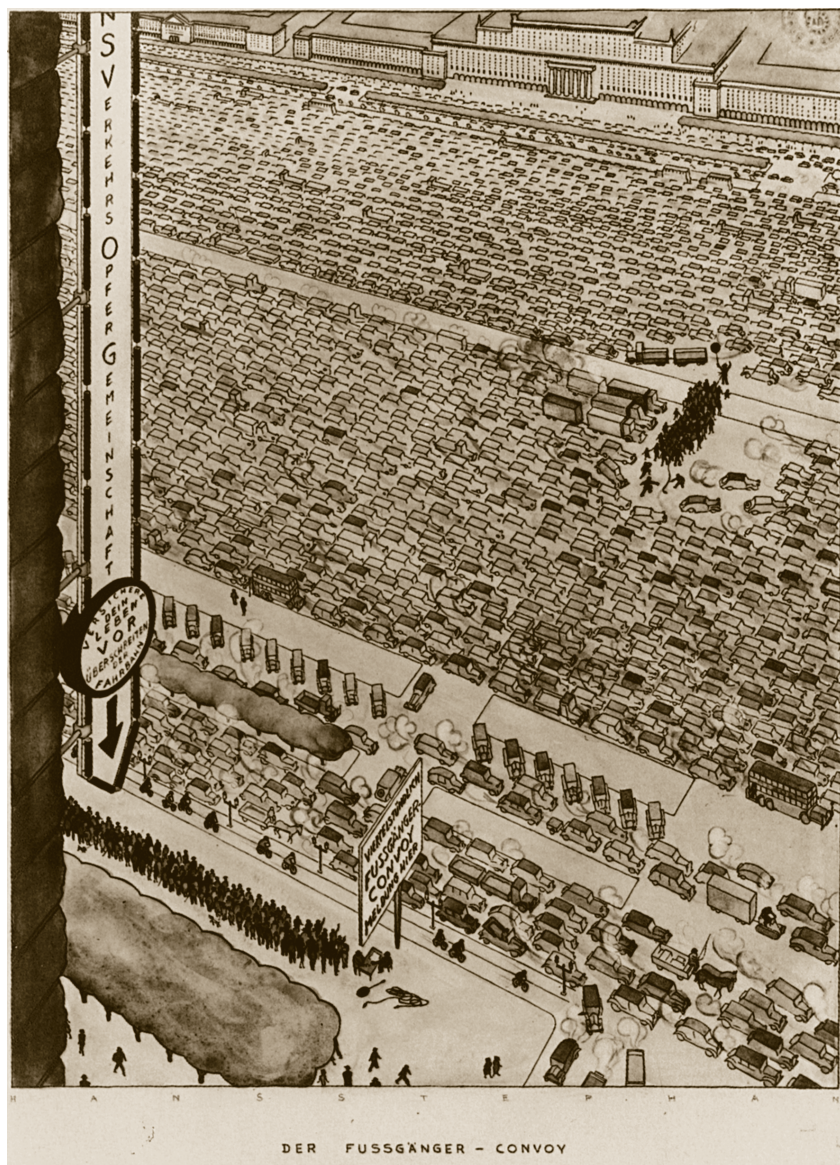
In some of the drawings, Hans Stephan directs his satire towards the colossal dimensions of the 'New Berlin', and even if he again cannot conceal his admiration, thanks to his sense of irony, he is able to see through the pretentious appearance. In these cases, the draughtsman seems to be more far-sighted than the architect and town planner!

In the drawing representing the construction of the Great Hall (*Irrtum beim Bau der Großen Halle*) (Fig. 9), a huge crane has grasped the Reichstag building by mistake, instead of one of the equally

big blocks of stone. Being at first sight just a joke about the enormous dimensions of the Great Hall, the drawing also carries a more explicit political message: by equating the Reichstag building, a symbol of the rejected democratic system, with a simple stone block, it also expresses its contempt for the 'old system', and its admiration for the new political power, being able not only to accomplish such huge undertakings as the construction of the Great Hall, but also, and more importantly, able to reshape the state and society.

If the drawing of the Great Hall may thus be regarded as an example of 'confirming satire', *Pedestrian Convoy (Fussgänger Convoy)* (Fig. 10) is certainly less so. From a bird's eye view, we witness how pedestrians have to be escorted through a traffic jam in order to reach the other side of the street. To the people of the city, the monumental axis, the pride of the planners, has turned into a nightmare.

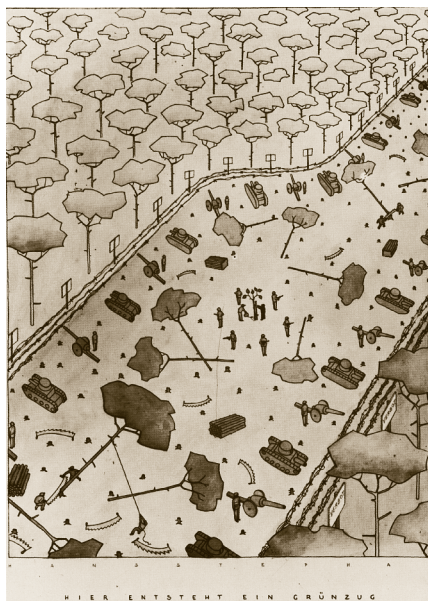




10. Hans Stephan. *Pedestrian Convoy (Fussgänger Convoy)*. 1940s



11. Hans Stephan. *The Last Allotment Garden* (*Der letzte Kleingarten*). 1940s

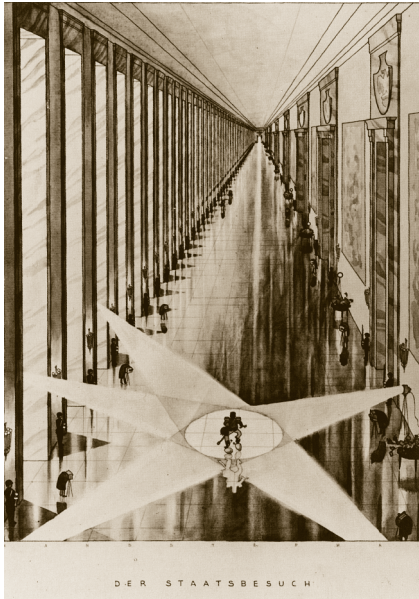


12. Hans Stephan. *A Green Belt is Founded* (*Hier entsteht ein Grünzug*). 1940s

The conflict between the megalomania of the plan and the perception of ordinary people is represented drastically in the drawing *The Last Allotment Garden* (*Der letzte Kleingarten*) (Fig. 11). Sitting in front of their idyllic hut and obviously unaware of what is going on around them, an old woman says to her husband: ‘Do you think that we too will be included in the Plan?’ One may of course smile at such ignorance, but the amiable representation of their lovely spot certainly reveals the draughtsman’s sympathy, in spite of all the annoyance he, as a planner, probably experienced with people refusing to leave their ground.

No less ironic toward the inherent lack of common sense of certain parts of the Berlin plan is the drawing *A Green Belt is Founded* (*Hier entsteht ein Grünzug*) (Fig. 12). In the middle of a forest, workers have cut down hundreds of pine trees in order to make room for some tender plants of broadleaf trees, the beginning of a garden-like green belt. In-





13. Hans Stephan. *The State Visit (Der Staatsbesuch)*. 1940

terestingly enough, the workers have to be protected by soldiers. We may ask against whom they have to be defended. As far as we can see, no serious opposition was possible against the enactment of the plan. But the drawing reveals involuntarily to what a high degree a military presence was considered normal in Nazi Germany.

The most ambiguous drawing of the cycle is *The State Visit (Der Staatsbesuch)* (Fig. 13).

We see an ambassador, or maybe a foreign statesman, on his way to an audience with Hitler in the new chancellery (Neue Reichskanzlei). The chancellery, designed by Albert Speer and opened in January 1939, was the first representative building to be finished in Berlin during the Nazi era. The extremely long gallery was modelled on the Hall of Mirrors at

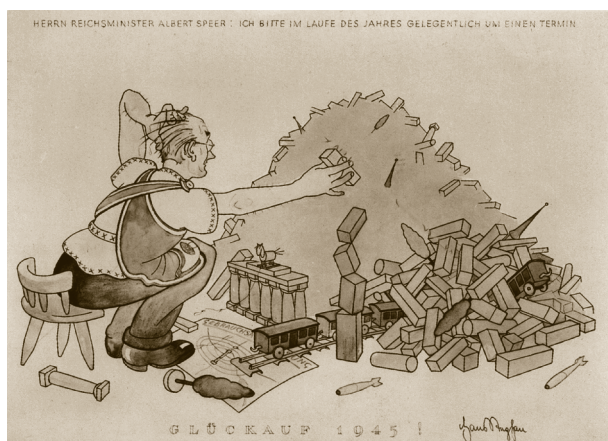
Versailles, and formed part of a sequence of rooms leading up to Hitler's office. Without any doubt, this enfilade, by its mere dimensions, was designed to impress and intimidate visitors; the polished marble floor effectively strengthened the effect. The poor ambassador is represented as walking on eggs (alluding to the German saying *Eiertanz*), an eloquent visual expression of his unease.

This drawing certainly articulates a kind of juvenile, sadistic pleasure in the maltreatment of a senior representative; at the same time, however, the draughtsman's wit reveals the regime's crude inhumanity.

As we have seen, in spite of some rather ambiguous drawings, Hans Stephan's cycle, taken as a whole, by no means denigrates the extravagance of the Berlin plan. His satire is amusing, and often enough ironic, but it does not question the importance of its target. It is by nature affirmative, not disparaging. Anything else would, of course, have been impossible,

considering Stephan's position in Albert Speer's office. This, however, does not answer the question whether the drawings could have been published or not. As we have seen, they must have been known to colleagues and friends, and perhaps even to the listeners of his lectures in Germany and abroad. But this was still a restricted, professional audience; it is hard to believe that he could have allowed himself to present them to the general public. The case of the Berlin comedians Die drei Rulands (The Three Rulands) clearly demonstrates the narrow limits to satirical commentary on official undertakings of great importance in public. In 1939,

they performed a rather harmless, merry song (*Die Stadtbauarchitekten*) about the nuisance caused by the extensive demolition of central parts of the city, including the large railway stations like the Potsdamer and the Anhalter stations, motivated by Speer's plan: 'Let's break up one railway station after the other, / And the rails, throw them away! / New life sprouts only



14. Hans Stephan. A New Year card for Speer: 'Happy New Year 1945!' (*Glück auf 1945!*). 1944

out of ruins, and ruins are so beautiful!' (*Lasst uns Bahnhof um Bahnhof verschrotten, / auch die Schienen, weg mit ihnen! / Neues Leben blüht nur aus Ruinen, und Ruinen sind so schön!*).

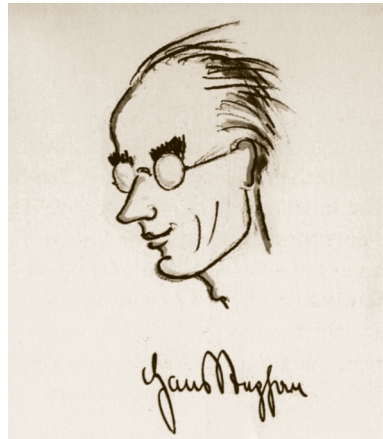
The effect was dramatic. Joseph Goebbels himself, the minister of propaganda, intervened with a furious article in *Völkischer Beobachter*. In a letter to Speer, Hans Stephan and some of his colleagues, after visiting the performance, declared that they had enjoyed the comedians' humour and wit; in their opinion, the song by no means ran down the great project. Nothing is known about Speer's reaction. The letter, however,

had no effect; the two comedians were banned from the stage, and were not allowed to perform any more.

In December 1944, large parts of Berlin lay in ruins, the Red Army was rapidly approaching the River Oder, and the collapse of the Third Reich in the near future was obvious. Already in 1943, the staff of the GBI had stopped work on the Berlin plan; the architects and planners were now instead engaged in the more urgent task of supplying living quarters not only for the population of Berlin but for the populations of many other destroyed German cities as well. Having lost their offices in the city, the departments of the GBI had to spread out into the less damaged suburbs and villages around Berlin. During the last months of the war, Hans Stephan spent much time driving around to find temporary premises for them. This background explains the grim humour of his New Year card to Speer (Fig. 14): a child (Hans Stephan himself) sitting in front of a chaotic pile of building blocks, representing the destroyed city, and looking in despair at the master plan of Berlin.

The text reads: 'Happy New Year 1945!' (*Glück auf 1945!*). In addition, Hans Stephan asks 'Reichsminister Speer' for an appointment in the course of the year (*Herrn Reichsminister Albert Speer: ich bitte im Laufe des Jahres gelegentlich um einen Termin!*).

A few months later, Stephan left Berlin with a lorry loaded with large parts of the GBI archives. Most of that material was 'recycled' as ordinary paper during the first years after the war. Stephan himself started a new career as an architect, first in the West German province, but finally ending up as one of the leading town planners of West Berlin (*Senatsbaudirektor*), in charge of organising the Interbau Exhibition in 1957.



15. Hans Stephan. Caricature self-portrait.  
1940s

Lars Olof Larsson

*Fröhliche Neugestaltung – Linksmasis miestų planavimas.*

Humoristiniai komentarai apie Berlyno perstatymą nacių valdymo metais

*Santrauka*

Straipsnis pristato vokiečių architekto Hanso Stephano (1902–1973) satyrinių piešinių ciklą *Fröhliche Neugestaltung* (laisvai išvertus iš vokiečių k. – *Linksmasis miestų planavimas*), sukurtą apie 1940 metus. Karo metais piešiniai, be abejo, nebuvo skelbti, tačiau cirkuliavo architektų aplinkoje. Kai kurie piešiniai buvo perfotografuoti, nes Stephanas juos demonstruodavo skaitydamas paskaitas Vokietijoje ir už jos ribų. Piešiniai pirmą kartą publikuoti 1956 m. žurnale *Bauwelt*, siekiant pademonstruoti Stephano kritiškumą nacių režimo atžvilgiu; paskiau skelbti keliuose straipsniuose, o visas ciklas (14 piešinių) pristatytas ir išanalizuotas tik 2008 m. šio straipsnio autoriaus. Originalai, deja, neišliko, tad tenka naudotis nespaltotomis fotografijomis ir vieno iš piešinių spalvota reprodukcija. Pastaroji skatina spėti, kad Stephanas ketino piešinius išleisti, tačiau taip pat kelia klausimą: kokiai auditorijai jie galėjo būti skirti?

Hansas Stephanas, baigęs Berlyno aukštąją technikos mokyklą (Technische Hochschule), pradėjo karjerą kaip urbanistas, o 1937 m. buvo priimtas į Alberto Speero (1905–1981) vadovaujamą sostinės perstatymo įstaigą (Generalbauinspektor für die Neugestaltung der Reichshauptstadt arba sutrumpintai – GBI), kurioje vadovavo vienam iš trijų planavimo skyriaus padalinių. Kolegos netruko įvertinti jo piešėjo talentą, ir Stephanas kūrė bendradarbių (tarp jų net Speero) karikatūras bei šaržus. Stephano piešiniai perteikia jaunų Speero įstaigos architektų pastangas nepasiduoti karo metų niūrioms nuotaikoms, taip pat gana ironišką žvilgsnį į megalomaniškus Berlyno perstatymo planus. Žinoma, visi šie vyrai, užėmę privilegijuotą poziciją, buvo visiškai lojalūs režimui. Atrodytų, kad Stephanas piešė iki 1942 metų. Prasidėję Berlyno bombardavimai atėmė jam norą linksmintis ir pajuokti Berlyno urbanistinių pertvarkymų planus, juo labiau kad 1943 m. projektavimo darbai buvo nutraukti, o GBI darbuotojai iš miesto centro persikraustė į naujas darbo vietas priemiesčiuose ar net kaimo vietovėse. Tikėtina, kad piešinių originalai žuvo su dalimi įstaigos archyvų. Stephanas po karo tęsė architekto karjerą Vakarų Vokietijos provincijoje, tačiau gana greitai buvo pakviestas į Vakarų Berlyną, kur tapo vienu svarbiausių urbanistų.