

# It was the meeting place of the top Nazis: now a Dane is helping to transform it

In Germany, a country estate with a dark history is being renovated. Once the top Nazis met there to develop their ideology. Now the place must be transformed into something very special with the help of a well-known Danish architect.

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The academy's premises peek out from the treetops. Saaleck Castle can be seen in the background. Photo: Design Academy Saaleck



KRISTIAN STOFFER NIELSEN

A good eight decades after the Nazi regime of terror suffered its downfall at the end of World War II, buildings and sites associated with National Socialism remain a sore point in Germany and Austria.

The conversion of Hitler's Austrian birthplace into a police station has become the center of debate after a documentary revealed that this plan aligned with the Nazi dictator's own wishes for the building.

But in central Germany, a magnificent estate where the Nazi elite once met to discuss politics is now to be transformed into something that stands in stark contrast to the past. And that with Danish help.

With the Danish architect Dorte Mandrup at the head of the renovation project, the former meeting place of the top Nazis is now being transformed into a design academy whose values are diametrically opposed to Nazism.

"We will take it in the opposite direction. Not exclusion, but inclusion – basically redefining and combating all the horror that was conceived here in the 1920s and 30s," says the academy's founding director, Arne Cornelius Wasmuth.

Design Akademie Saaleck – abbreviated dieDAS – is the name of the academy. It is located on the lush clifftops outside the village of Saaleck. The academy overlooks the Saale River, which meanders through the state of Saxony-Anhalt in central Germany.



A computer rendering of architect Dorte Mandrup's renovation plan for dieDas. Photo: Dorte Mandrup

Since 2020, every year dieDas has opened its doors to four selected students for a course on design, development and architecture with a focus on the pressing issues of the time, sustainability and technology. Always based on reflections on the property's dark past.

The building complex that today forms the framework for dieDas was built at the beginning of the 20th century by the architect Paul Schultze-Naumburg under the name Saalecker Werkstätten. Here Schultze-Naumburg built both his private home and the workshop for his construction and design business.

In addition to his architectural work, Schultze-Naumburg was an artist and writer as well as an ardent nationalist, anti-Semite and racial ideologist.

Schultze-Naumburg's political beliefs became increasingly evident in both his writing and in his prominent voice in the social debate as the years progressed.

He joined the German Nazi Party in 1930, and his property in Saaleck became throughout the 1930s a meeting point for the Nazi elite, who flocked to the picturesque area to discuss and develop their ideology.

"All the leading Nazis were here. Adolf Hitler, Wilhelm Frick, Richard Walther Darré and Joseph Goebbels. They came to visit Schultze-Naumburg," says dieDAS director Arne Cornelius Wasmuth.

## Unpleasant monuments

Wasmuth is educated in political science and worked for over a decade as a journalist. Later he returned to the school bench to study European cultural heritage with a focus on so-called "unpleasant monuments", which he sees the Saalecker Werkstätten as.

"We have quite a few buildings in Germany that remind us of the National Socialist past, but in very few cases I think that processing the history of the places has been successful," says Wasmuth.

Wasmuth found out about the Saalecker Werkstätten and the history of the place in 2015. The property had been empty since 1995. Until then, and in the defunct East Germany – GDR – the premises had been used as a nursing home.



dieDas is located in the village of Saaleck in Saxony-Anhalt. Photo: Dorte Mandrup

"It was a super interesting historical location to frame. Without losing sight of its history, but by bringing young, international people here to develop a better vision for the framework of the future – in a hotbed of everything that went wrong in the 20th century," he says.

DieDAS was made possible with the financial support of art collector Egidio Marzona, who co-founded a foundation which in 2018 bought the Saalecker Werkstätten to form dieDas Akademie. Since then, the Danish architect Dorte Mandrup has been hired to develop a renovation plan for the property.

When the renovation of the property is complete, dieDAS will offer 16 study places annually to talents in design, artwork and architecture.

## Reflection on the past

For Wasmuth, the Saalecker Werkstätten is special in the sense that the building complex was precisely not built by the Nazis, but taken over and contaminated by their followers and ideology.

"It became a meeting place for society's darkest forces, but it wasn't Nuremberg (where the Nazi party built an extensive gathering place, ed.)," he says.



"The Saalecker Werkstätten has that in common with many buildings in Germany. It forces you to be critical of the built environment around you and the stories they tell.'



The building complex's past was long concealed after the war, but it has housed a nursing home.  
Photo: Dorte Mandrup

The Design Academy's program and development manager Tatjana Sprick says that the locals from the nearby village of Saaleck mainly associate the building complex with its time as a nursing home.

Because when Saaleck fell on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain after the Second World War, the dark prehistory of the building complex was largely concealed.

"Saaleck was in the GDR. So there was no public conversation about what had taken place," says Sprick.

Wasmuth says that the dark history of the Saalecker Werkstätten has already laid the seed for reflection among the students at the academy.

"Not just for Germans, but for all our guests," he says.

"We had, for example, a student from Chile who started talking about the repression during the Pinochet regime. Many peoples have a history of or experience of oppression, fascism or racism. Saaleck helps bring this to the fore, forcing one to face it and talk about it.'