

Following the Berlin Wall

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Fig. 1 : Removal of the Berlin Wall near the Reichstag
Photo credit: Landesarchiv Berlin/Kasperski, Edmund

The removal of walls, towers and fences created an emptiness: a shadow monument present in the minds and memories of the people not only in Berlin, but all over the world.

- Axel Klausmeier and Leo Schmidt, Wall Remnants
- Wall Traces¹

INTRODUCTION

A 25-mile long stretch of empty space straddled by two walls and patrolled by armed guards was the quintessential icon of the Cold War, a key component of the Iron Curtain. If any one man-made entity represented a division of people and ideologies, it was the Berlin Wall. After its destruction in 1989, it became a powerful symbol of liberation and unity. Since then, the open wound left by the Berlin Wall's removal has inspired intense political debate.

The Berlin Wall was, in fact, more than one wall. It was a series of defense fortifications comprised of walls, fences, and an empty space, commonly called the no man's land or *Todesstreifen*, a death strip that defined an inner-city border zone running between East and West Berlin. Today, in many parts of the city, especially in the highly developed areas near the Brandenburg Gate and the Reichstag, traces of the Wall have been all but erased. (Fig. 1) No uncomfortable reminders have been left behind to tell the story of Berlin's division. In contrast, grassy fields marked by broken pieces of the border fortifications can also be found; vacant spaces in the city remain open for interpretation and experimentation. As a tool of the East German regime, the Berlin Wall's sole purpose was to restrict and to confine; it stood for a singular political ideology. This paper will examine how this former dividing line, once dead and limited, has evolved since 1989 to become a palimpsest for multiple meanings and uses. By allowing for diverse interpretations of the space once occupied by the Wall, totalitarian thought is ultimately negated, and new developments, such as parks, bike trails, and me-

monials, all contribute to the reading of the former border area as something both negative and positive, both barrier and open space, making it a place of simultaneous forgetting and remembering.

BORDERS AND SECTORS

At the end of WWII, the European Advisory Commission divided Berlin into four Allied administrative sectors. Initially, Berlin's citizens could move freely between the various sectors but, as time went on and tensions between the Soviets and the Western Allies mounted, the Communist government made it increasingly more difficult for people to move in and out of the Soviet-controlled areas. From 1949 until August 1961, more than 2.7 million people emigrated from Soviet-controlled East Germany to the West – many of them through Berlin – to seek better economic opportunities or escape from a government that was becoming progressively more autocratic.² This massive flow of people from East to West created a huge political problem for the Soviet-controlled and newly founded, German Democratic Republic.

In an impressive maneuver of tactical planning and manpower, the border between East and West Berlin was solidified overnight, on August 12th, 1961. On the morning of August 13th, the citizens of Berlin awoke to find an impenetrable barrier of barbed wire patrolled at intervals by armed East German police. Over time, the barbed wire was modified and replaced by a brick wall and, at its final stage of development, two concrete walls replaced the brick one and a no man's land containing guard towers was added between them. This border defense system or "Anti-Fascist Protection Wall," as it was called by the East German authorities, became known as the Berlin Wall.

STOLEN SPACE

Although the original barrier began as an improvised barbed wire barricade, it was quickly fortified and imposed onto the city fabric. As the barrier was reinforced and enlarged, it swallowed up all that it traversed. Every portion of the city falling in and adjacent to the path of the Wall was modified to accommodate the new border fortification. Buildings were either vacated and demolished, or left with their border-facing windows bricked up. Waterways were fitted with metal gates and rooftop parapets

were installed with machine gun mounts. Cemeteries were cleared of gravestones, and bodies were moved in order to clear the way for the Wall. Streets, waterways, and other public places were distorted into spaces that would no longer be used for their intended functions. Lines of movement and locations formerly full of life all became vacuous expanses where no person, other than an armed East German border guard, was permitted to tread. These urban spaces were stolen from the citizens of Berlin and turned against them as a weapon in the Cold War.

The Berlin Wall went through several permutations, with the final "4th Generation" iteration being considered by the East German government as a masterpiece of engineering. The Berlin Wall actually consisted of several security layers, making it an almost insurmountable barrier. Between two walls lay a no man's land, or death strip, containing obstacles such as trip wires for possible escapees. The emptiness of the death strip played an important role in allowing an unobstructed view of the border area. A paved road running along the border area permitted soldiers to patrol the death strip either on foot or in vehicles. Floodlights positioned at regular intervals lit the entire border area deterring any possibility of slipping through unseen by night, while a control strip of raked sand would show any traces of fugitives. Anyone spotted fleeing over the border by a guard would either be detained or even shot. The construction of the border fortifications cleared away the complexity of quotidian life, opening a "sterile" border zone, a perilous, empty landscape hostile to any intrusion.³ (Fig.2)



Fig. 2 : The sterile border zone Photo credit: Landesarchiv Berlin

FORGETTING AND REMEMBERING

On the night of November 9th, 1989, East and West Berliners joyously began hacking at the walls that had divided the city for 28 years. Soon, very little of the Berlin Wall remained. Today, there are only three remaining sections of the Wall still standing in the city, their length totaling just over one mile. In their article, "Die Berliner Mauer – Erinnerung ohne Ort?" Jarauch, Sabrow, and Hertle describe the destruction of the Wall and the implications of its hasty destruction:

Because of its hated omnipresence, the breach of the horrific border fortification coincided with failure of the East German government, and in 1990, the year of [Germany's] reunification, it was so thoroughly demolished and disposed of that the remaining pieces could only be found with difficulty. One and a half decades later, the success of the project "Tear Down the Wall" is a tragedy, and the Wall's destruction now undermines the desire for an authentic place of remembrance, a place that makes the frightening memories of the Wall tangible.⁴

One of the main points of interest for Berlin's visitors is the Wall. An article from *Der Spiegel Online* reports that a recent survey by the Berlin Tourism Board found that many tourists were disappointed to find that very few portions still remain.⁵ Who can blame Berlin's citizens for quickly removing something that had restricted their freedom for so many years? The destruction of the Wall inspired an emotional catharsis for many Germans.⁶ The act of physical liberation resolved rapidly, but the struggle for psychological liberation from memories associated with the division will continue for many years to come.

An exhibition entitled "Virtuelle Mauer / ReConstructing the Wall" opened on August 13th, 2008, on the 47th anniversary of "Barbed Wire Sunday", the day Berlin was first divided. In an attempt to recreate part of the Berlin Wall, two artists – sponsored by the city and federal government – built a 3D computer model of a portion of the Berlin Wall as it stood in the mid-1980s. The project's intent was to give exhibition visitors an "encounter with the city and the Wall, and with the human drama that arose where the two collided."⁷ Comments left by readers of a recent on-line article about the newly opened exhibition express the contradictions arising out of recreating, even virtually, the "human drama" produced by the Wall: "As a native "Easterner", I am for removing every small piece of the Wall...a project like the "Virtual Berlin Wall"

is a joke. What good does it do to open the wound over and over again?" and the response to his comment: "to open the wound over and over again' is absolutely the wrong expression, with that kind of argument one could say that no reminders of the horrors of Third Reich should remain today!"⁸

Another facet of the psychological disjuncture left by the Wall is a concept Germans often refer to as the *Mauer im Kopf*, the "Wall in the head", an invisible mental barrier separating East Germans from West Germans. Differing political ideologies, stereotypes remaining from years of separation, and perceived economic inequality, have all led to a sense that the country continues to struggle with the pain of disconnection and estrangement caused by the division. Comprehending this mental separation is critical when considering proposals for the areas once occupied by the Wall.

Making places that foster reconciliation and healing for communities along the former dividing line, while concurrently retaining reminders essential to creating an "authentic place of remembrance" is a difficult balancing act.⁹ Different parts of society, East and West Berliners, East and West Germans, and visitors to the city from around the world, all have diverse expectations of how the spaces left by the Berlin Wall should function and what they should represent today; the following projects all attempt in varying degrees to incorporate many of these values and expectations into their planning.

THE BERLIN WALL TRAIL

Directly after the fall of the Wall, Berliners frequently used the guard patrol road located between the two fortification walls as a bike path. Environmental action groups pushed to have the path, which was proposed to run along the area previously occupied by the Berlin Wall, declared an official public bike trail. Bike symbols were painted on the patrol road to claim it for bicycles, but were later removed and portions of the paved road destroyed by East German border guards still in control of the border zone. Taking its inspiration from the Boston Freedom Trail, the plan to create a bike path along the Wall later resurfaced and, in 2001, the Berlin city government approved the 6.5 million dollar proposal to create a bike and hiking route now officially known as the "Berlin Wall Trail". The Berlin Wall Trail is a portion of a larger "Iron Curtain Trail" planned to run from the

Barents Sea in the Arctic to the Black Sea. A large portion of the trail falls directly in the no man's land created by the Wall, turning the erstwhile death strip into a vital thread running through the city, connecting nature preserves, parks, and public spaces together as a green belt.¹⁰

The path takes on various identities for those who use it. The trail that follows the remainders of the inter-city fortifications runs from the northern edges of Berlin to the southern city limits makes it possible to traverse the entire city by bicycle. In its most utilitarian role, the path functions simply as an alternate way of traveling through the city. In cases where the trail passes through parks and nature preserves, it is used for recreational purposes. (Fig. 3) Families use it for their Sunday walks in the countryside, and bird watchers stop to identify birds along side it. For these people, the path's significance is as a nature trail in the city, but the traces of the Wall can still be seen, if one chooses to look. It is possible for tourists, or anyone curious about the Wall, to follow the Berliner Mauerweg signs and stop at any of the 40 stations providing historical information about various points of interest marking the way.

The idea for the trail sprang from its unofficial use by the community. By recognizing this new purpose as an official trail and funding its construction, the city has successfully activated many portions of the no man's land left by the Wall in the city. Whether it functions as a transportation route, a place for recreation and relaxation, or as a learning tool, the Berlin Wall Trail affords its users a variety of experiences. It can function as a common trail like any other, but its path permits its users to interact with the Wall's historical artifacts in a new, dynamic way. By connecting key parts of the city once touched by the Wall, the trail creates a new perception of the former border; places where all traces have disappeared can now easily be compared with areas where the Wall still has a presence. In this way, the Wall can be read as a narrative created by series of places. The trail connects the two following sites presented in this paper, Engelbecken and Bernauer Strasse. They exemplify two radically different approaches to planning in the former border area.

ENGELBECKEN

When following the Berlin Wall Trail through the district of Kreuzberg one discovers a large open



Fig. 3 : Death strip transformed as bike path and nature trail

space with a church at one end, facing out towards a large pool of water. *Engelbecken*, or "Angel Fountain", was restored in the years following German reunification as part of a public garden; it is the only body of water still remaining from the Luisenstadt Canal, designed by Peter Joseph Lenné in 1842. Lenné's plan created a major axis along the canal punctuated by a series of water spaces: pools of water defined by walkways and apartment buildings. The axis ended at Engelbecken, named for its guardian angel perched atop the adjacent church of St. Michael. The canal was eventually refilled in 1926 and converted to a garden, keeping with the overall form of Lenné's original design.

In an unfortunate turn of events in 1961, Engelbecken and the garden were completely filled in as the Berlin Wall cut through the area, severing the axis created by Lenné. Ironically, a portion of the Wall still followed the form of his original plan, thereby incorporating the space left by Engelbecken into the death strip – the unrelenting monotony of the Wall was paradoxically broken by the gentle curve of the classical plan. (Fig. 4)

The construction of the Wall caused many community buildings and public spaces to be destroyed or cut off from the residents who used them. As with numerous other sites in Berlin, the division of the neighborhood surrounding Engelbecken had an enormous impact on the inhabitants living adjacent to the Wall. 7000 of the 8000 strong congregation of the church of St. Michael lived in West Berlin at the time of the city's division, so that a majority



Fig. 4 : The Wall following Lenné's classical plan
Photo credit: Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung

of the congregation was unable to worship in their church located on the eastern side of the border. The construction of the Wall sealed the fate of the entire ensemble: a church without its congregation, and the fountain and garden disconnected from the neighborhood – destined to lie trapped under the weight of the border fortifications for 28 years.

After reunification, the garden and Engelbecken were gradually uncovered and restored. The neighborhood grassroots group, Bürgerverein Luisenstadt, was heavily involved in overseeing the full restoration of the garden. They clearly saw the restoration as a way to “bring the inhabitants of the two parts of Luisenstadt [the neighborhood] closer to each other.”¹¹ Due to the lack of public funds, the fountain was only partially excavated in the early 90s, where it slowly began to fill with ground water, attracting wild birds such as herons and ducks; fish and turtles could also be found swimming in the water. This new development furthered the argu-



Fig. 5 : A new urban oasis at Engelbecken Photo credit: Antenne Springborn

ment that the garden's restoration should be fully funded and completed.

Although the Wall had a powerful effect on the neighborhood, both as a physical and mental presence, very little tangible evidence of its existence now remains. Nature, playing a role in the no man's land erasure, has created an oasis for wildlife and people alike. Following its final phase of restoration in 2007, Engelbecken has become one of the most attractive spots in Berlin. The park and fountain now stand as a testament to the communities' desire to resurrect a history predating the Wall. For them, this was the most positive way they could overcome their painful past. Engelbecken is now a place where new memories can take shape. (Fig. 5)

BERNAUER STRASSE

One of the most infamous places found along the Berlin Wall Trail is Bernauer Strasse. For older Germans, hearing the name of that ill fated street evokes memories of people jumping out of windows to escape from apartment buildings, suddenly captured in the dividing line between East and West Berlin. The apartment buildings stood in the East, while the street out front lay in the West. In their article, “Remembering the Berlin Wall: The Wall Memorial Ensemble Bernauer Strasse,” Knischewski and Spittler observe that the Wall as an archetype has historically been understood in several ways, and these readings have, in turn, had an impact on society's interpretation and understanding of the remains of the Wall today. The fragments of the Wall can be claimed as evidence of the East German regime's brutality; they can also be viewed as reminders of the division of the German people. For some, they remain as icons of the Cold War, commemorating the victory of the West over Communism. Knischewski and Spittler argue that all of these readings are simplistic, each one with its fallacies and truths.¹² Synthesizing the complex set of values assigned to the Wall is extremely difficult: any new intervention in the former border area can influence how the place is interpreted by society today.

A memorial now stands at the Wall fortifications that remain at Bernauer Strasse, which are now some of the best preserved in Berlin, making it a prime location for a memorial and open-air exhibition space. The memorial designed by Stuttgart architects Kohlhoff and Kohlhoff is a 695-foot stretch

of repaired and perfectly preserved border fortifications consisting of eastern and western facing walls and the no man's land between them, complete with patrol path and flood lights. The whole complex is bounded on both sides by two 26-foot high Corten steel walls. The entry to the memorial leads visitors to an area located behind the eastern facing wall, where one can attempt to peek through slits in the wall to catch glimpses into the inaccessible death strip. The architect's intention for the entry sequence is unclear. During the time of division, people approaching the area from the East would have put themselves in grave danger: this view of the Wall never existed for the average person in the German Democratic Republic. If this symbolic approach is to signify that times have changed, then architects have created a paradox in that the death strip is still impossible to enter, except by jumping the wall like a fugitive. In reality, the memorial, "blocks the view that one is supposed to see," according to Alice Ströver, the Green party's spokeswoman in the Berlin parliament.¹³ Most visitors to the memorial are confused by what they have witnessed, and leave with more questions than when they entered the space.

Perhaps it was the perplexing statement of the Berlin Wall Memorial with its lack of answers that motivated the city government to seek a clearer concept for the area adjacent it, a section of no man's land set aside for the Berlin Wall Open-Air Exhibition Space and Information Center. This area is part of the Berlin city government's *Gesamtkonzept*, a new master plan for the entire Berlin border area, including the aforementioned Berlin Wall Trail. The Berlin Senate states that Bernauer Strasse should become a place where the public can learn from the tangible artifacts and spaces left by the Wall. "Here, history becomes more comprehensible and meaningful because [Bernauer Strasse] is an authentic show-place; it has a connection to real life experiences."¹⁴

OPEN-AIR EXHIBITION SPACE AND INFORMATION PAVILION

The competition for the Berlin Wall Open-Air Exhibition and Information Center at Bernauer Strasse was held in 2007 with three explicit goals, as specified by the Berlin Senate for Urban Development in the program statement. The first goal was to reveal the physical remains of the Wall and to create a place that would permit the viewer to see it

as it once stood – without recreating what no longer exists. The second aspiration was to reveal the immaterial traces of historical occurrences at the Wall, such as escapes, or the interruption of daily life caused by the Wall. The final aim of the competition was to provide a meaningful place for the names of those who died trying to escape to the West. In addition, the Information Center would provide a library and gallery for further historical documentation of the site.¹⁵

The award winning ensemble was proposed by the Berlin architects Mola Winkelmüller, ON Architektur, and the landscape architecture firm Sinai. One of the key concepts of the design was to create a new network from the remaining artifacts of the border at Bernauer Straße; Corten steel would be employed as a unifying design element to accentuate and link the remaining Wall traces. The voids left in the Wall would be filled by using thin rusted rods of Corten turned at an angle to recreate the scale and the path of the Wall when viewed from the side, while becoming almost completely invisible when viewed from the front. The rods allow for the passage of people to and from the Open-Air Exhibition area, while permitting visitors to visualize the space of the former no-man's land. Ms. Lüscher, the director of the Senate for Urban Development comments on the ephemeral power of the new addition, "What is special about this proposal is that the designers had the guts to erect the Wall again, but as a kind of veil...a veil that is porous."¹⁶ (Fig. 6)



Fig. 6 : The new Berlin Wall as a Corten veil

The Berlin Wall Information Center stands as a beacon next to the former border area, the red Corten

facade sets it apart from its surroundings, but the rust color also signals that it belongs to the same assemble as the Wall Memorial and the Open-Air Exhibition. The base of the building runs parallel to the street and also marks the phantom path of the Wall, while the top floor rotates to give visitors an unimpeded view over the Open-Air Exhibition. This permits the visitors to observe the physical space of the border area while simultaneously viewing exhibitions that focus on the Wall and the former East German regime. The residual space at ground level created by the rotation of the volumes results in a covered entry for tour groups and visitors. The design of the Information Center is austere and contemporary; its materials and massing set it apart from much of the architecture built in Berlin in recent years. Its presence clearly signifies the Senate's desire to reach out to a younger generation, one that may not remember what the Berlin Wall once signified.

CONCLUSION

The identity of the void left by the Berlin Wall has been redefined in diverse ways, and it remains a place that attracts meaning to it in the way that "a lightning rod attracts thunderbolts."¹⁷ The Berlin Wall Trail and the Information Center with its adjacent Open-Air Exhibition at Bernauer Straße are but a few of the recent architectural interventions that are slowly beginning to stitch together the remaining fragments along the East- West border in a manner that allows people to visualize, and to potentially begin to make sense of, past events that have remained incomprehensible for such a long period of time. Each intervention with its own significance, whether for healing or remembrance, imparts a new understanding of the former no-man's land and the Wall remnants. The importance of these recent developments can not be understated, as the actress Tilda Swinton contemplates while cycling through the grassy fields where the Wall once stood, "They're building a wall somewhere else now."¹⁸

ENDNOTES

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