

ARTICULATING A DISSONANT HISTORY

THE SITE OF MEMORY IN A UNIFIED BERLIN

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This paper began with an exploration of a particular building and its signification within the landscape of Berlin today. The building is a WWII bunker situated in the physical location of Berlin-Mitte and the temporal condition of a city that is attempting to come to terms with many incongruous and discontinuous elements of its recent past. The bunker is, in itself, a rather insignificant building within the larger framework of the city and its story. At the same time, as evidence of Berlin's traumatic recent history becomes increasingly inaccessible, the building has incredible significance as a memory-tool, as a means of providing a space among the fragments of history for the necessary activity of remembering.

Following the reunification of the former East and West, Berlin is struggling to reinvent itself. In the process, certain crucial and difficult aspects of its remarkable past are being left unresolved or even erased. Although the act of demolishing a structure or building to fill a void does not destroy history, it does eliminate objects which are associated with history or otherwise alters the fabric of the city. Revisions of the city's physical form shift the field of evidence from which we construct common narratives and shared identities. Given that a city inevitably undergoes ceaseless transformation, are not the memories associated with the city continually reinterpreted and altered as well? And how, in this regard, should a city such as Berlin treat objects of a past which many would rather see forgotten than remembered?

Vergangenheitsbewältigung, a word which translates as "coming to terms with the past," is very much a part of the contemporary German vocabulary. Yet coming to terms is often mistaken for forgetting. In *Stranded Objects*, Eric Santner addresses the "work of mourning" (Freud's *Trauerarbeit*) as a strategy to work through the legacies of fascism and the Holocaust.¹ Acknowledgment and recollection are essential to this task. First something must be identified as lost. Then, through mourning, that thing is separated from oneself through recognition of that thing as the "other." It is through this process of mourning that one is able to truly let go of that which has been lost.

By repressing memories of the past, on the other hand, individuals allow these past events to remain a part of the self. Freud describes a state of melancholy (a

second form of bereavement apart from mourning) as resulting inevitably from an inability or reluctance to separate the "self" from the "other." It has been argued that Germany has "only gotten as far as a vague, apparently inexplicable, end-of-the-century melancholy," resulting from an unwillingness to remember and, consequently, to mourn.² Rather than being forgotten, memories of the past seem to have been excluded from consciousness. For memories so horrible, such repression seems a fully logical and natural reaction of its participants. As a result of a largely collective subjugation of such memories, however, second and third generations have, for the most part, inherited not a memory, but the repression of memory.

So what stirs memory? How can the city play a part in making memories conscious in order to allow for a working through of those memories?

Memory is both an element of history (in that memories at once affect and belong to the body of information that is history), as well as an activity which articulates that history through a process of remembering. Despite its reliance on that which has come before, however, memory is always situated in the present. In *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, Andreas Huyssen considers this opposition:

*The temporal status of any act of memory is always the present and not, as some naive epistemology might have it, the past itself, even though all memory in some ineradicable sense is dependent on some past event or experience. It is this tenuous fissure between past and present that constitutes memory, making it more powerfully alive and distinct from the archives or any other mere system of storage and retrieval.*³

Indeed memory involves more than simply the substance of our memories, or a process of recalling something that has been learned and retained; it also has to do with how we remember. The latter is specifically related to the activity of "remembering." This operation involves the composition of a compilation of overlapping and incomplete images or memories. More than a recollection, the act of remembering incorporates and reconstructs

the matter of memory in our minds, according to our current needs.

So what does it mean to exercise or to have the power of memory?⁴ Is memory something which enables us to act, to produce an effect? If we accept that memory is a component of history, and that history is used, among other things, to determine identity, then the manner of our remembering could in fact influence the content of our identities. Indeed, memory plays a very large part in the construction of how we perceive ourselves.

Accompanying the reunification of Germany was the dissolution of the GDR. The former East Germans are now expected to synthesize their identities under West German structures. As a consequence the current condition invalidates a system of definition by opposition.⁵ Certainly the unification caused an altogether new set of issues to come to the foreground and, with these in tow, the city is re-imagining its identity. Understanding that the entirety of the city's history, no matter how difficult or extraordinary, is critical to its identity, how can we then allow for a reading of history which appeals to, and does not disregard, the complexity of the past?

Precisely because memory is so fleeting, the physical objects of history (texts, buildings, etc.) become all the more important in that they can provide a way for us to remember. Evidence of Nazi Germany exists in the fabric of the city. But for the most part it is removed from the public domain. After the war, the remains of the Gestapo and SS headquarters in Berlin were destroyed and leveled by the occupying American forces. Architectural competitions held in 1983 and 1992 sought an appropriate memorial for the site. Prior to the second competition, entitled 'Topography of Terrors,' the site was excavated, uncovering the remains of several buildings and producing a mound of earth and rubble. Today the site marks a moment in time in a very powerful way, but (as a spectacle of horror and, perhaps appropriately, a virtual pile of debris) it will always exist outside of the everyday. It is an archeological site, something to be observed from another moment in time.

Is it possible for a more anonymous, less imposing object to play a different role? Could such an object be represented in such a way that it is not an icon, but a complex, "normalized" part of the city? As a fragment, not necessarily any more or less important than another part, could a more inconsequential building act as a sort of temporal monument by which one could challenge the more popular stories of the past by adding to the layers of complexity which support a more genuine and accurate story?

Largely unaltered since its construction in the early 1940s, the bunker at 24 Albrechtstrasse acts as a still image, a record of a particularly distressing moment in history. Like the Fascist government that it represented, the appearance of the building is somewhat deceiving. The form of the building is monumental, a symbol of a perfect culture, a utopian ideal. The symmetry of the building asserts an equal and ordered society. At the same time, the greatness of the structure is forbidding. Functionally, the bunker was by no means public. Entrance was granted to a limited elite, the building's content largely inaccessible. It encased that which was sacred not

to the culture as a whole, but to the elite few who granted themselves the power to make such decisions.

If such a building is to allow, first, for readings of history which are far more multi-dimensional than any monument and, second, for these new renderings to play a part in the shaping of collective identity, then the building must submit to a cultural incorporation. The physical objects of history must be involved in a continual process of transformation as they are culturally engaged and their meaning shifts. This is oppositional to the static property of the traditional monument which requires only passive participation by dictating appropriate memories to us. In a different way, by incorporating the physical fragments of history into the present cultural and political landscape of the city, the original meaning is continually reinterpreted with respect to the present context. For a culture which is struggling to transform its identity, it seems appropriate for the urban landmarks which act as evidence of the past to likewise undergo transformation.

A building such as the bunker could undergo a change in use which acknowledges new priorities of the public realm. It could be subject to a change in presentation which challenges the common conception of the building. Through reinterpretation, rather than deletion, the act of remembering is made possible. It is essential only for these memories to remain active long enough to create identity which is based on resolution rather than denial.

The Reichstag is a powerful symbol for most Berliners. Likewise the wrapping of the structure in 1995 by Christo and Jeanne-Claude was nothing if not symbolic. Yet it was the activities of the wrapping and unveiling, together with the cultural celebrations and debates that accompanied these actions, that seemed to hold the most power. Although the physical transformation to the structure was temporary, the subsequent unwrapping did not serve to return the Reichstag to its original meaning. On the contrary, it symbolized rebirth and renewal, leaving the building forever altered in the public mind. The open presentation of the event and the vitality of spectators as they interpreted its meaning and participated in its public debate allowed for such a shift in the building's signification. As the meaning of the building changed, so have the narratives and memories associated with it. For the people of Berlin, Christo's wrapping of the Reichstag has arguably transformed the building more than the future more lasting adaptations and re-inhabitation will ever be able to.

The discontinuous and conflicting nature of Berlin is one of its defining characteristics and is by no means strictly a recent phenomenon. In 1931 the critic Siegfried Kracauer portrayed his affection for the city with the following words:

Before my window, the city condenses into an image that is as wondrous as the spectacle of nature. This landscape is artless Berlin. Unintentionally, she speaks out her contradictions – her toughness, her openness, her coexistence, her splendor.⁶

Today urban planning strategies such as that of "critical reconstruction" promote similarity instead of difference; they remember limited aspects of Berlin's remarkably rich and varied past. Just as individual memories of a single event can differ radically, so is all of our historical evidence subjective. Understanding the city as a complex body of fragmented voices and memories, we must acknowledge the significance of its historical pieces, consider what they purport, and what it means to destroy or to assimilate them.

In the midst of a tremendous effort through renovation and new construction to unite a once divided city, let us consider, not the impact of architecture, but the conceivable effect of not building. For almost 30 years, citizens of the former East and West Berlin claimed contrary experiences and stories. The single common element with which both halves of the city could identify themselves was the incident of their division. The Berlin wall served as a constant reminder of an incredible physical separation through the center of the city as well as of a split between political ideology and cultural realities. By erasing all traces of the wall, are we not denying the common memory? What would be the effect, for instance, of a moratorium (perhaps the duration of one generation) on any construction activity on the site of the former wall, a moment of silence per se both in celebration of its absence and in honor of the shared

memory that the now vanished object represents?

NOTES

- ¹ Eric L. Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990).
- ² Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Ticket to a New Decor," trans. Brian Massumi and W. G. J. Niesluchowski, in *Copyright 1* (Fall 1987), p. 15.
- ³ Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), p. 3.
- ⁴ *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* defines the first sense of the intransitive verb "remember" as "to exercise or have the power of memory." (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1985).
- ⁵ I believe this condition was particularly magnified in Berlin due to the presence of the wall and the role that it served as a perpetual reminder of the separation of the city and its inhabitants into two parts. Berliners continue to cite a person's place of residence during the Cold War as rationale for current differences in character or opinion.
- ⁶ This passage from Siegfried Kracauer's *Streets in Berlin and Elsewhere* is cited in "Artless Berlin," Rudolf Stegers, published in *World Cities: Berlin*, Alan Balfour, ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), p. 36.