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Memory in Berlin: a short walk

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Last October I moved to Southampton, 'City of the Titanic' – what a strange way to advertise a place. The memory of the sunken ship is still very much alive. I did keep my apartment in Berlin, though, and from time to time I manage to spend a couple of days there. From a distance, the city looks and feels different. When I go shopping in my favourite market hall or for a latte macchiato in Café Atlantic, I try not to step on the stones laid in the ground beside the normal cobblestones. They are of the same size, but painted in something golden; they glitter in the sun and bear an inscription such as 'Hier wohnte Alfred Hohenstein, Jg. 1920. Deportiert am 10.05.41 Auschwitz'.

Alfred Hohenstein could still live here. This could be a very different place. If not, Landwehrkanal will forever be 'the place where Rosa Luxemburg was killed', but it is such a beautiful element of my city, and I especially like Admiral's Bridge. I used to live just around the corner for six years. This is the Berlin of former squatter colonies, houses which were really saved at that time from demolition by the squatters who now have turned into proprietors of huge apartments and very nice gardens. We are now very close to the former Wall. Here all of it is gone, its former presence can only be 'felt' in the long stretch of unbuilt green space that runs along the even earlier Luisenstaedtischer Kanal, a little sister of Landwehrkanal, closed in 1928, and turned into a park where, between 1961 and 1989, there stood (or 'ran'), they say, a wall. Today it is a park again, separating rather than as before bringing together the inhabitants of Kreuzberg and Mitte. Only seventeen years ago two political systems were in opposition at this very place. On the very site of the former Wall, strange forms of existence developed, maybe unique for Berlin. Still an old man from Turkey sits in front of a hut/house with a nice garden, on a plot that most assuredly cannot belong to him. The Wall, in whose shadow he built his little house, is long gone but he is still there, living in the shadow of the disappeared monster. Crossing borders, which is such an important concept for cultural anthropology and for transnational studies, is his very own and private way of living.

Do such theoretical concepts help us to understand what is going on in Berlin? I am not sure. I have the impression that everyday-life somehow

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has acquired a place beyond the grasp of all these theories. The daily users of 'my' Berlin seem to develop their own practices, and when we have finally managed to give them a name and an identity, the city users have already moved on to new activities. We are close to Brandenburg Gate, and we know that only some 200 metres from there we will see the Holocaust Memorial. How happily can we celebrate the fact that Pariser Platz, in front of the Gate, has become a real and functioning urban square again? On to the memorial: what a strange place. As a piece of architecture it is great, not only huge, but really great. As a piece of public urban art it is integrated perfectly into this bizarre landscape. Brandenburg Gate: the new embassy of the United States, soon to be opened; opposite, Potsdamer Platz, reconstructed and glittering, and nearby, the new buildings for the German federal states. And Hitler's bunker, not to be forgotten, though we cannot see it. The former 'Ministergärten' in the rear of Wilhelmstrasse. And in the middle of all this, the 2,700 commemorative stelae courtesy of Mr Eisenman.

Crowded, almost always. Children play hide and seek, teenagers jump from the stelae, eat, drink, smoke, read, rest, kiss on and between them. A peaceful picture. Too beautiful? Too perfect. Not torn enough, not ugly enough, not ambivalent enough even as far as it is supposed somehow to mirror Germany's relationship to its Nazi past. This is not a Jewish memorial; it is a German one. There were other projects and proposals. One went so far as to suggest the destruction of Brandenburg Gate with the rubble to be distributed on the ground. I see the point of the idea but I have to admit that I like the Gate better. I am very much afraid of people who have made the Holocaust their business or their profession. Books are fine, from academic research or from memoirs, as also are oral history projects and archival documentation. Movies are already problematic, as are museums. But this, here?

The two main components of Berlin's memorial complex – complex, indeed – meet not far from here. We can go down Wilhelmstrasse and will soon find the exhibition building *Martin-Gropius-Bau*. To the rear, the cellars of the Gestapo headquarters in the former (and now destroyed) Prinz-Albrecht-Palais have been unearthed in the last 20 years. The provisional – still! – archaeological site 'houses' the permanent and changing exhibitions of the 'Topography of Terror'. This is a fine exhibition; you do not find crowds here, but always a number of interested people, groups and individuals, who read and study the documents about the Nazi dictatorship in Germany and Europe. Very quiet, very serious. And immediately above the excavations we can see a long stretch of the Berlin Wall, the symbol of the communist dictatorship in Germany and Europe. Today the Wall is very thin because so many people have tried to take home a piece of it; some of the poor remnants have to be protected. Back in 1987 when the Martin-Gropius-Bau housed the exhibition 'Berlin, Berlin' for the 750-year-jubilee, the show ended at the rear entrance of the building

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where you could only open a door – and look at the Wall; you were not allowed to step outside.

How do these two elements of Berlin's history – and of Berlin's and Germany's politics and culture of memory – relate to each other? Does one explain the other? Does one make the other one seem smaller, or bigger? Can we just remember the one and forget about the other?[1] And, of course, in the context of our meeting here, what is the role of planning in all this? An American scholar, Jennifer Jordan, has been moving about this same 'landscape of remembering and forgetting' in the last years, and she has just published a very interesting book *Structures of Memory. Understanding Urban Change in Berlin and Beyond* (Stanford, 2006). Chapters trace the 'memorial culture in Berlin after 1945', the fate of 'pre/1989 memorials after the fall of the wall' (mostly anti-Fascist memorials in East Berlin), then the 'new memorials since 1989', and the last chapter deals with 'Forgetting places', referring mostly to former synagogues in both parts of the city which were partly 'rediscovered' by artists and put to new, if contemporary, use.

'Remembering', Jordan maintains, 'can, and does, leave its marks on the skin of the city' – a strange metaphor, as if remembering were some kind of corporal punishment! But 'in order to observe precisely how it does so', she writes,

> I examine both successful and failed memorial projects, and compare those places that have emerged into the official memorial landscape with those that remain only in the memories of eye-witnesses or diligent researchers. I find that collective memory shapes the urban landscape in part at the observable intersection of four specific factors: land use, landownership, the resonance of the site's meaning with a broader (often international) public, and the presence or absence of what I call a 'memorial entrepreneur', which is to say, someone willing to lobby on behalf of memorialization.

So Jordan identifies 'day-to-day practices of memorial construction which range from international debates about art and history to the bureaucracies of local parks departments, historic preservation offices, or property registries', and her question is 'how to treat real estate with a difficult past'. This is true, generally. In the case of the former Wall, the very place is stood on ground that belongs to the Federal Republic, and for years now former owners have been pursuing a pointless fight for their property. In general, there is a lot of 'lobbying, fund-raising, letter writing, long evening meetings after work, writing letters to the editor, talking, thinking, reading, mourning, and celebrating' on the part of the 'memorial entrepreneurs' and the civil society.

[1] This should be the place to mention theories of memory (from Maurice Halbwachs to Aleida Assmann) and also of research into totalitarianism.

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With Jennifer Jordan, we can analyse memorials 'not only in their cultural, artistic, and historical contexts, but also in the economic, bureaucratic, and legal contexts utterly essential in shaping the production of memorial space' and build a bridge between the study of memory sites and studies of real estate markets and the range of symbolic meanings of urban spaces. How fascinating this is – and how exhausting. Maybe Southampton is not such a bad place, after all.

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