Counterpreservation

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Published by Cornell University Press

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The Nazi barracks area in Oranienburg described in the preceding chapter was one among many sites of Nazi power that survived the war. While some high-profile structures, like Hitler’s Chancellery, were demolished in the immediate postwar era,\textsuperscript{1} many other sites were abandoned or converted to other uses that eventually normalized them and displaced them from collective memory and awareness—from the transformation of the Aviation Ministry in central Berlin into the GDR House of Ministries, to the conversion of a slave-labor camp facility (the Arbeiterstadt Große Halle) into a hospital, and even the continued use of Albert Speer’s lampposts along the 17th of June Street.\textsuperscript{2} If places explicitly evocative

\textsuperscript{1} The war-damaged Chancellery was destroyed following an official Soviet decree, after the Soviets mined the ruins for materials for the Soviet Memorial in Treptow and a nearby subway station, today the Mohrenstraße station. See Senat von Berlin, ed., \textit{Berlin: Behauptung von Freiheit und Selbstverwaltung 1946–1948} (Berlin: Heinz Spitzing, 1959), 669.

of the Holocaust, such as concentration camps, were eventually turned into memorial sites, most of the myriad and more prosaic buildings commissioned or used by Nazi officers and bureaucrats gradually disappeared into the cityscape, destroyed or forgotten.  

In the late 1970s and 1980s, a self-searching attitude on the part of historians and the general public led to the rediscovery of Nazi threads enmeshed in the local histories of neighborhoods and specific places. Since then, the German “memory boom”—a phenomenon discussed by Andreas Huyssen, among many other scholars—has been accompanied by the rediscovery and marking of significant sites, such as deportation platforms in train stations, destroyed synagogues, collection centers for deportees, and administrative buildings. One of these sites is the Topography of Terror—a block in central Berlin that was home to so many official and unofficial Nazi offices and meeting points that it became the de facto Nazi headquarters in the city. I mentioned this site in the previous chapter in relation to an unbuilt proposal for a memorial made of trees and metal grilles on its grounds. It is the new, and seemingly definitive, configuration of the site—inaugurated in 2010—that interests me here. Both the Topography of Terror and Project MoKrnning deal with sites of perpetrators, both operate in gray zones where Nazi terror intermingled with everyday German life, and both deal with places marked by decades-long forgetting before rediscovery. Both also incorporate ruins and fragments of buildings formerly used by Nazi officers for the oppressive and murderous activities of the Third Reich.

But these two projects respond to the respective challenges of their sites very differently. Libeskind’s flooded ruinscape is an example of counterpreservation; the Topography of Terror, in turn, frames its ruins much more stably. But if I present the Topography of Terror in contrast to Project MoKrnning, it is not as an implicit judgment of the former, but rather as a comparative and nuanced example. Counterpreservation is not a panacea for all memorial dilemmas, and by no means should it be considered as the default solution, or as a standard against which all other projects should be measured. In addition, the Topography of Terror offers another dimension to this discussion: that of public reactions to the built project. While there are reports of public responses to Libeskind’s design, these were responses to the proposal. Project MoKrnning did not have a chance to be tested in the

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4. Ibid., 79–82.
same way as the built and finished Topography of Terror, and in this way the latter may offer speculative insights into how the former might have worked.

The Open Wound Metaphor

The Topography of Terror has been extensively dissected in many publications, notably by Karen Till in her study of memory and urban culture in Berlin after unification, and also by James Young, Brian Ladd, and Jennifer Jordan, all of whom published foundational books on memory, memorials, and Berlin.⁶ Till’s work, in particular, is a landmark reference both for her critical and theoretical understanding of the area, and for her extensive research and documentation, including detailed field notes on the site’s changing stages, and interviews with key players in the creation of the Topography of Terror. The site, however, has changed significantly since these works were published; the most recent of these books, Jordan’s \textit{Structures of Memory}, came out in 2006, just one year after a competition was held to redefine the layout of the site, and well before the winning proposal was built. The transformation has been so radical as to demand new critical reflection, especially with relation to the arguments raised by these authors. Here, I will recount the prior history of the site, relying on the work of these four authors, so as to set up my discussion of the later transformation and contemporary configuration of the area.

The Topography of Terror is a documentation center and historic site in central Berlin, at the corner of Wilhelmstraße and Niederkirchnerstraße. In the Nazi era, the latter was called Prinz-Albrecht-Straße, and it was the location of many organizations associated with Nazi power and Nazi terror. Hitler’s secret police, the Gestapo (\textit{Geheime Staatspolizei}), had been housed there since 1933, occupying a building originally created as a school of applied arts.⁷ The Gestapo was central in managing and carrying out the Holocaust. It was responsible for tracking down and capturing people who were deemed to pose a threat to the Nazi regime (Communists, active members of the political resistance, racial and sexual minorities),

\begin{itemize}
\item Young, \textit{The Texture of Memory}, 82; Ladd, \textit{Ghosts of Berlin}, 155–56; Till, \textit{New Berlin}, 63–64.
\end{itemize}
with free rein to do so independently of the judicial system. The Gestapo headquarters also had cells where prisoners (mostly political) were incarcerated, tortured, and murdered. Other buildings in the Prinz-Albrecht block sheltered desktop criminals and Nazi officers, such as Reinhard Heydrich, head of the Security Service (SD, or Sicherheitsdienst) of the SS. Heydrich’s office was located in the Prinz-Albrecht Palais, an urban palace redesigned by Karl Friedrich Schinkel in 1830 as a residence for Prince Albrecht. Next door, the Prinz-Albrecht Hotel, used as an informal meeting point for the Nazi elite, became the seat of the SS in 1934. Across the street was the new Aviation Ministry, a showpiece of Nazi architecture designed by Ernst Sagebiel and built in 1936, and next to it the former Prussian Assembly, which in 1934 was turned into the People’s Court (the Volksgerichtshof, a court where the laws of the Nazi state were enacted). Josef Goebbels’s propaganda newspaper, Der Angriff, had its office there too. Most of the buildings in that block had a direct connection with the Nazi terror state.

Today, this is a densely used tourist area, served by the Potsdamer Platz subway station—one of the busiest in the city. Just west of the Topography of Terror, the pristinely refurbished Martin-Gropius-Bau now functions as a museum for popular temporary exhibitions featuring high-profile artists and themes. In 2014, for example, there were shows on David Bowie and on the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei; other past blockbuster themes included photographers Robert Capa and Henri-Cartier Bresson, filmmaker Stanley Kubrick, ancient Egyptian treasures, and artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude. A couple of blocks farther is Potsdamer Platz, the postunification mixed-use development of commerce, corporate offices, hotels, and entertainment. Still within walking distance one can reach the Berlin Philharmonic, the New National Gallery, the State Library, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, the Reichstag building, the Brandenburg Gate, the German Chancellery, embassies, state offices, hotels, and the Tiergarten (one of Berlin’s largest urban parks), among many other attractions. This context of heavy tourist traffic combined with political, commercial, and cultural functions is important for understanding how the Topography of Terror was ultimately shaped into a defined, controlled, sleekly finished memorial site where the incorporation of ruins is the opposite of Libeskind’s open-ended, iconoclastic approach.

In between the intimidating history of the area under the Nazis, and its glossy incarnation in contemporary Berlin, there lies a messy stretch of destruction,

8. Rürup, Topography of Terror, 61, 63.
9. Once the People’s Court moved out in 1935 the building was renamed “House of the Fliers” (Haus der Flieger) by Hermann Göring. Rürup, Topography of Terror, 14.
10. Ladd, Ghosts of Berlin, 155.
forgetting, and conflicting claims to the city and to representations of history. Right after the war, the Prinz-Albrecht block was quickly cleared out as the Gestapo headquarters, the Prinz-Albrecht-Hotel, and the Prinz-Albrecht Palais—all of which had been severely damaged by Allied air raids, but none of which was beyond reasonable repair—were demolished by the North American occupation forces, under whose jurisdiction the area fell. The area was on the border between the Soviet and the American sectors of Berlin. In 1951 the East German government renamed Prinz-Albrecht-Straße as Niederkirchnerstraße in honor of Käthe Niederkirchner, a Communist militant murdered in 1944 in the Ravensbrück concentration camp. In 1961, the Wall was built around West Berlin; on this particular location it sliced the street lengthwise, cleaving the street from the block, so that Niederkirchnerstraße ran on the eastern side of the Wall—more precisely, in the no-man’s-land space in between the two parallel walls that formed the border fortifications. The block of the former Gestapo headquarters fell on the western side.

As in neighboring Postdamer Platz, the area adjacent to the Wall was deserted. On their side, East Berliners could not approach it. On the other side, West Berliners only did so to paint graffiti or peek at the other side from observation platforms. The western side of the Wall was otherwise at the margins of Berlin. The Wall marked the end of the city, the point where streets stopped abruptly. In the case of the Prinz-Albrecht block, the Wall was not even lined by sidewalks or streets, as in many other areas. There, the Wall was abutted by a large block of debris and ruins: the site of the demolished buildings on the Prinz-Albrecht block was turned into a recycling facility, and the damaged but extant Museum of Applied Arts was abandoned and occupied by homeless people and drug addicts. This liminal and hard-to-reach site was cut off from the flow of people, from everyday uses and itineraries, and from significant functions and events. The space was excluded from the quotidian experience of the city just as it was from its social imaginary and collective memory. It was so marginal to the city that at some point an expressway was planned to overrun it.

In this way it is not hard to picture how the history of the Prinz-Albrecht block was forgotten—as early as the immediate postwar era. Günther Weisenborn, who had been imprisoned at the Gestapo headquarters, recalls visiting the site in 1950 with Bertolt Brecht, who had also been an inmate there. Weisenborn’s report reveals the perplexity of their encounter with the decaying remains of their former prison, overtaken by debris and plants. The report was reprinted in a book by

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15. Rürup, Topography of Terror, 196; see also 190, 197–98. Other sources on the postwar forgetting of the area include Young, The Texture of Memory, 85; Ladd, Ghosts of Berlin, 157–58; Till, New Berlin, 76–79.
the Topography of Terror foundation, where it appears below a photograph taken by Brecht on the occasion of this visit. The photograph shows the ruins of the prison courtyard—the dismantling skeleton of the building forming a backdrop for debris, vegetation, and the standing figures of Weisenborn and journalist Max Schröder. Weisenborn’s text and Brecht’s photograph capture the site on the verge of its collective oblivion, suggesting that even at that early point in the postwar era it held meaning only for those who were intent on remembering. Given the site’s history, it is on some level understandable that many people willingly pushed it aside from attention and from memory—and not just because of its geographical marginality. By the late 1970s, its history had been largely forgotten. There was no public memory or public mention of the Prinz-Albrecht block, even though it had been quite visibly and unmistakably identified as the center of Nazi horror during the 1930s and 1940s.16

The symbolic mapping of the city during the Third Reich, which allowed for this site to be the “most feared address in the city,” had been erased from the symbolic mappings of postwar Berlin. Part of this erasure lay in the stringent denazification efforts through which the Allies sought to eliminate all vestiges of Nazism.17 For the Allies, every place associated with Nazism was a potential honor tomb and pilgrimage site; every physical remnant a potentially virulent seed of Nazi ideology. Denazification did not consist only in the prohibition of the swastika, of Hitler’s Mein Kampf, or of certain words and songs; it also justified razing Hitler’s Chancellery, burying his bunker, and destroying buildings associated with his government even if these buildings had a previous, non-Nazi history. The elimination of these material signs and spaces assumed that Germans could be safe from the dangers of Nazism if they were kept away from Nazi objects and ideas. Nazi sites such as the Chancellery or bunkers were perceived by the Allies as potential shrines for recalcitrant or neo-Nazis. As Young puts it, “Many feared that if the ruins of the Gestapo-Gelände were left, they might even be readopted by former SS soldiers as a memorial not to what they had perpetrated, but to what they had lost.”18

In the 1980s, a young generation of students, scholars, architects, and historians (as well as many “lay” citizens) engaged in a collective rediscovery of history

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16. “The most feared address in Berlin” is a favorite phrase to describe the site. It appears in English-language news stories, guidebooks, websites, and several scholarly works. See, for instance, Young, The Texture of Memory, 82; Till, New Berlin, 69; and Ladd, Ghosts of Berlin, 156. Gefürchtete adresse appears in German, mostly in news stories and websites, but not as frequently as the English version; in any case, German sources concur that the site inspired fear during the Nazi era, as the name of the exhibition indicates.


18. Young, The Texture of Memory, 84.
in West Berlin, as recounted by Till in *The New Berlin*. This rediscovery was multifaceted. It was a reaction to the historical silences resulting from postwar dogmas and taboos (denazification, Nazi denial, the repression of the Holocaust). The members of this new generation desired to confront national history on their own terms. This attitude was expressed in unconventional, dynamic, and participatory approaches, such as “history workshops” (*Geschichtewerkstätten*), educational programs in schools and museums, independent research, informal or unofficial city tours, historical-awareness activism, and so on. As Susan Neiman so vividly recalls in her Berlin memoirs, West Berlin in the 1980s was a citywide arena for the collective engagement with *Vergangenheitsverarbeitung*.

But the historical turn was not exclusive to contesting students, artists, or alternative cultural groups. The interest in the Holocaust and the Nazi era went mainstream with the television series *Holocaust*, broadcast in West Germany in 1979, and with contemporary publications and news stories on the Nazi period (most famously the story of the supposed discovery of Hitler’s diaries, which turned out to be a forgery, in 1983). Conservatives also started approaching the past publicly, less concerned with working on the past than with overcoming it once and for all. The engagement with the burden of the Third Reich and the possibility of reinscribing Germany as a “normal” nation culminated in the *Historikerstreit* (historians’ debate). Many institutions, exhibitions, heritage programs, and discussions were devoted to rediscovering other periods of German history besides and beyond the Third Reich, and thus finding sources of national pride and cultural value uncontaminated by Nazism. This attention to “prouder” moments of history played a role in the creation of the Topography of Terror, as I will explain below.

The site now called the Topography of Terror had not yet been named as such—it had not yet even been publicly remembered as a site of Nazi power. Attention

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21. If Adorno worried about Germany moving on too fast from its past, a few years later Neiman tells a different story: the young Germans she meets, many of whom are students or artists, focus on the Nazi past almost obsessively, with no intention of putting it behind. Susan Neiman, *Slow Fire: Jewish Notes from Berlin* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), 14–18.


first turned to the aforementioned Martin-Gropius-Bau, then still known as the former building of the Museum of Applied Arts. The Martin-Gropius-Bau had originally been designed by Martin Gropius and Heino Schmieden in 1877–81 to house the Museum of Applied Arts; after 1918 it was converted for use as the Museum for Pre- and Early History and the East Asian collection.\(^{24}\) It was damaged by bombing during the war (unsurprisingly, considering its location next to the Gestapo headquarters) and almost demolished; after two decades as a ruin, it was listed as a protected monument in 1966 and restored in 1978 (it then underwent a second renovation with an adaptive reuse design by Hilmer & Sattler in 1998).

The 1978 refurbishment of the Museum of Applied Arts building was a government initiative that made room for both conservative and contestatory currents. The architectural renovation and the museological approach were conservative. The façade of museum was restored to its formal splendor without any mention of its larger sociourban context during the Third Reich, when it was part of the infamous Prinz-Albrecht block. Architects and preservation officials were concerned with the physical condition of the building, and given its precarious state it is not hard to imagine that constructive and aesthetic aspects alone might have demanded enough attention to obscure symbolic or historical elements. The building was renamed Martin-Gropius-Bau, in honor of one of its architects. This decision suggests a move away from the building’s institutional and contextual history before the war and instead a focus on its material presence, drawing attention to the designer’s name. Evidently the building could not be renamed after its previous institutions, given that West Berlin already had an Applied Arts Museum and a Museum for Pre- and Early History, installed elsewhere. But as a result the building’s institutional history (including the history of its surroundings) was pushed to the background, while the structure’s architectural presence came to the fore. In the 1980s, as Germans rediscovered buried histories all around the city,\(^{25}\) the silence on the larger contextual and urban history of the building stood out by contrast.

The Martin-Gropius-Bau inaugural exhibition was on the history of Prussia, a foundational reference for German identity and more particularly for Berlin, which had been the Prussian capital. This foundational reference was (at least at first glance) protected from Nazi contamination by chronology. Even though many traits of Nazism were common to Prussian society—militarism, regimentalism, centralized power—and arguably explain at least in part the appeal of Hitler to Germans, it does not follow that every supporter of Prussia (or of Prussia-led

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25. The movement to uncover hidden histories was associated with two factors: scholarly attention to social and everyday histories; and engagement of “ordinary citizens” in historical research and reflection. The movement rested on mottoes such as “Dig where you stand” and “the search for traces” (*Spurensuchen*). See Till, *New Berlin*, 90; and Rudy Koshar, *From Monuments to Traces: Artifacts of German Memory, 1870–1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 226–28.
Counterpreservation in Reverse

unified Germany) was a Nazi-in-training. Many Social-Democrats and many German Jews supported the Second Reich, were patriotic, and enlisted in Emperor Wilhelm II’s army to fight in World War I. For those looking for a less controversial historical ancestry, Prussian history offered a way out of the Nazi burden (even though, of course, there are many connections between the history of Prussia and that of Nazism).

But several historians working to prepare this exhibition were also in some way associated with the alternative history movements of the time. As they worked on the originally planned exhibition on Prussia, the history of the Prinz-Albrecht block was being slowly uncovered by citizens’ initiatives. Groups of historians organized informal tours of the empty land next to the Martin-Gropius-Bau. As a response, the government abandoned plans for an avenue on the site and organized a competition to transform it into a park and memorial (this is the competition I mentioned in the previous chapter). The organizers of the Prussia exhibition incorporated the unearthing of the history of the Prinz-Albrecht block by including informative material on this history inside the exhibition. This material was placed near a window of the Martin-Gropius-Bau overlooking the empty, rubble-covered site, so that a visitor to the exhibition gazing through this window would also be looking at the former site of the Gestapo. In this way, the Nazi history—which had appeared physically and institutionally extraneous to the program of the Martin-Gropius-Bau—was now incorporated with a visual demonstration of the complicated historical and memorial entanglements of the whole block.

Soon after the competition result for a memorial park on the former Gestapo site was divulged, the excavation of the area revealed that, in contrast to what had been previously thought, there still existed physical remains of the site’s former buildings. Sections of the cellar, foundation, and prison cells of the Gestapo headquarters had endured, and their discovery transformed the empty lot. The Prinz-Albrecht history could not be dismissed anymore as an immaterial past invoked by a smattering of contesting historians; it was now anchored by the evidential presence of the subterranean Gestapo structure. The area became informally known as the “Gestapo terrain”—Gestapo Gelände. A temporary exhibition called Topography of Terror was set up in 1987. The first incarnation of this exhibition bespoke its grassroots, subversive origins: the installations were modest, provisional, and less concerned with an aesthetic or curatorial statement than with displaying and revealing the history of the site, opening up this information to the public, and preventing destructive developments such as the new avenue or even the memorial

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park (which assumed an empty site and made no provision for displaying or preserving the ruins).

The exhibition underwent many changes over the years, with somewhat more permanent structures replacing the earlier ones. In 1993 a competition was held for a permanent structure to house a documentation center, which began to be built according to a design by Peter Zumthor. That structure was then abandoned halfway, ostensibly because of budget concerns. Some have suggested that Zumthor’s design was deemed inappropriate for the site, as it would have been too “spectacular” and thus would have competed for attention with the mission of the memorial. The building would have been too “powerful, a symbol in itself,” according to Thomas Lutz, head of the memorial-museums department of the Topography of Terror, in an interview with scholar Randy Malamud. The change of heart delayed and eventually halted the construction of Zumthor’s building. This added yet another element of provisionality and fragmentation to the site, as the unfinished walls of Zumthor’s half-built design loomed over the site as a premature ruin, surrounded by fences and weeds. A new competition was held again in 2005; Zumthor’s unfinished structure was demolished, and the whole site gave way, for the first time, to a cohesive and all-encompassing plan. This was finished in 2010 and is now the permanent version of the Topography of Terror, which I will discuss below.

Before the 2005 competition, the Topography of Terror had gone from a temporary, provisional, in many ways makeshift exhibition to later incarnations that adapted it to unexpected and steady public interest, prolonging the duration of what had been conceived as a finite, ephemeral installation into an established but still open-ended memorial site. Even a decade into its creation, it retained the improvised and piecemeal quality of the earlier exhibition. Instead of an overarching plan, the site was shaped by partial and localized interventions, many of them pragmatic, addressing the unpredicted challenges that flared up because the site had never been cohesively planned for long-term public visitation—for example, at some point, portions of the site had to be covered with sand to protect some of the ruins from acid rain, removing these ruins from public view. The site was a haphazard landscape. On the northern side, along Niederkirchnerstraße and next to the Wall, the ground sank into an open-air trench, which formed the main path of the open-air exhibition. On one side, the trench was lined by the ruined walls of the Gestapo building, punctuated by exhibition plaques containing text and images, and covered by a simple wooden structure. On the other side, the trench was

bordered by a grassy slope that rose toward the middle of the block, above which was perched a metal container housing the documentation center.

Instead of a finished memorial, the Topography of Terror was a dug-out landscape. The layout was not defined, and the wooden structure that protected the ruins along Niederkirchnerstraße looked like a tent over an archaeological exploration in progress. In the early 2000s, this structure evoked the sense of adventure and hands-on history that had suffused the creation of the exhibition more than ten years before. Visitors partook in the impression that they, too, were part of this adventure, of this ongoing discovery housed somewhat precariously under a shabby and worn wooden roof. Different time periods intermingled: the Gestapo ruins below grade, remains of the Wall on the street level, the pile of rubble left over by a former recycling facility in the middle of the site, the interrupted construction of the future documentation center, and the newly restored façade of the Martin-Gropius-Bau. The core of the site was fenced off, the whole area taken over by plants and debris, forming an uninhabited and disordered space. The impression was such that many commentators called the site “an open wound.”

At the same time, many social forces disputed the site with competing claims for its use and historical narrative—from local residents who wanted a park and not a memorial to conservative politicians interested in more glorious aspects of the German past to the activist historians behind the exhibition.

As Ladd argues, the provisionality and chaotic aspect of the site not only illustrated conflicting tendencies in German society, but also performed the task of memory-work in a profound and meaningful way: “The combination of modest exhibition and lingering debate confronted the Nazi past more effectively than any ‘active museum’ or any definitive plan for an ‘open wound.’” Ladd’s interpretation is concurrent with the way other scholars have read the site. The Topography of Terror exemplifies Young’s countermonument in its relentless effort at historical exposure.

And Till pushes the wound metaphor further:

The excavated foundations and “forgotten” fields . . . were represented as a gash in the body politic. The open wound was a metaphor for the extreme pain, grief, and anguish caused by the actions of Germans working at this historical national administrative center before, during, and after the war. It also referred to the postwar neglect of this national history. . . . The layers of denial had to be lanced so that the nation could see the exact nature of the injury. . . . The Topography of Terror, as open wound, exposes the scars of history, as well as the contemporary consequences of destruction to the ideal of the nation, and asks visitors to confront this past (and this pain), to keep the wound open in the present, to continue the work of memory.

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32. Ladd, Ghosts of Berlin, 165.
33. Young, The Texture of Memory, 81–90.
Had it remained that way—open-ended, potentially always changing in small or large ways, responding to practical needs or social desires—the Topography of Terror could hypothetically have been another example of counterpreservation, not only because of its literal incorporation of ruins, but also because of its embrace of change, the lack of an overriding design, and the attending freedoms that such a site could afford a visitor: meandering in different directions, partial strolls, incomplete vistas taken in unpredictable order, multiple interpretations and questions.35

However, as I described earlier, the centrality of the site was too strong. Symbolically, it called for a resolution that would connect the site to official narratives about the place of the Nazi past in contemporary Germany. All around it in central Berlin, other sites were being shaped in definitive terms—the Bendlerblock exhibition center telling the history of German resistance against Hitler; the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe bowing to the need to recognize (some) Holocaust victims; the former Aviation Ministry turned into a bastion of German economic might as the Federal Ministry of Finance, with minimal public acknowledgment of the Nazi past of the structure. The Topography of Terror was another puzzle piece to be fitted into this larger discursive and urban matrix—a matrix that seems to turn the page of the “memory boom,” moving away from the probing debates of the 1970s and 1980s, and coming closer to a more reconciling (if contrite) position. Or, if one takes a more cynical view, a matrix that turns the “memory boom” into a tourist attraction, another station to be enjoyed amid other disparate experiences: shopping, movies, art exhibitions, the Reichstag dome, the Brandenburg Gate, Bratwürste, beer gardens.

As I noted above, the Topography of Terror is located in a central tourist area of Berlin. Not just any area: within walking distance one can reach the headquarters of the national government, and also Potsdamer Platz, one of the largest commercial developments in the city. After unification Potsdamer Platz was dubbed “the largest construction site in Europe”; it would have been naive to imagine that just a few blocks from it a large site such as the Topography of Terror would have been left to the whims and actions of social activists and local historians. As Till, Strom, and Colomb have argued, the center of Berlin has been claimed by private capital, the government, or a combination of both in the construction of the “New Berlin”—the bustling world city, the gleaming new capital.36 The Topography of Terror became another exhibition site among Berlin’s many “world-class” museums, memorials, and archives. On a more pragmatic level, the needs of the documentation center as a growing institution were also a factor. A metal container was not the most propitious space for the many research, educational, archival, and symbolic activities carried out by the documentation center; neither did it offer the

35. For a vivid evocation of the Topography of Terror in the 1990s and early 2000s, see Till’s field notes from her visits to the site and interviews with other visitors, in New Berlin, 107–19.
36. Till, New Berlin; Strom, Building the New Berlin; and Colomb, Staging the New Berlin.
most adequate facilities to support an increasing volume of visitors (including issues of physical accessibility and safety).

The New Design

The 2005 competition awarded first place to a design by architect Ursula Wilms and landscape architect Heinz W. Hallmann; the new version was inaugurated in 2010. The proposal won over the jury in part because, according to Lutz, “Wilms’s idea was not to have a building that is itself a symbol.”\(^{37}\) The design was chosen precisely for its removed neutrality—meaning that critiques of the built design should consider not only the architects’ intentions but also the requirements and expectations set by the Topography of Terror foundation. In other words, the design expresses an institutional and curatorial mission as much as the ideas of the architects. Wilms and Hallmann’s design consists of a low-slung gray prism with a square footprint and a central courtyard, placed in the middle of an open area covered with gravel and crisscrossed by cement pathways (fig. 19).

On the southeast corner of the site, on the corner of Wilhelmstraße and Anhalterstraße, a large, square plot is covered with locust trees. The dense, organic, free-growing tree grove contrasts with the rigidly ordered, gravel-covered northern end of the site. The tree area, a “little forest,” still contains the traces of a driving track used by West Germans in the postwar era, and it has been left as is to offer “an impression of how the grounds were used during the postwar period.”\(^{38}\) Wilms notes that it is a nature preserve, and as such “must be kept as it is,” but that it holds another meaning: “For us, the forest also represents the forgetting and suppression of the postwar era: first the carefree use of the land for pleasure and enjoyment; then the beautiful green and wild ‘nature.’”\(^{39}\) Wilms’s wording referring to the minimal interventions around this area is telling: “We . . . set it free through the scraggy stone surface around Wilhelm and Anhalterstraße.” Wilms and Hallmann not only set the space free through ground-covering choices; they also set it free symbolically, leaving its interpretation open.

Some visitors might understand the forest as a representation of postwar forgetting; others might not (see my discussion of Ana Souto’s critique, below). This is the same risk of misinterpretation I discussed with relation to Libeskind’s Project MoKrning and other memorials in the previous chapter. The alternative would be to include literal or symbolic signposting spelling out the meaning of architectural decisions and formal choices—a “how-to-read” manual. This would, however, not only dumb down the visual and phenomenological experience of the

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37. Cited in Malamud, “Meticulously Evil.”
design (underestimating both the design and the visitors), but it would also narrow meanings down to a predetermined interpretation. The value of open-ended architectural or memorial designs—be they examples of counterpreservation, countermonuments, or abstraction—is both the possibility for multiple interpretations (and thus for dynamic reflection and public debate), and the necessity for viewers or visitors to engage the memory process actively. This involves risk, including the risk of failure and miscommunication.

Such signposting is present not far away from the site: in 2007, the Topography of Terror Foundation installed thirty plaques telling the history of significant buildings and points on Wilhelmstraße.40 These plaques are freestanding glass rectangles with text and photographs; the glass allows the contents of each plaque to be overlaid with the sights behind it. Depending on the plaque, these sights are extant original buildings; or else trees or new structures, attesting to the loss of historic

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spaces, now to be glimpsed only in the photographs. The plaques are collectively called the Geschichtsmeile (History Mile), and attempt to capture the historical significance of a broad stretch of the city that could not have been contained in a memorial or museum (the buildings along the street are used today for government offices, residences, and commerce). Although at points the Geschichtsmeile betrays a certain anxiety—its profuse texts compensating both for the silence of buildings whose history is not apparent, and for the presumed ignorance of passersby—at the same time it is an ingenious way to activate historical awareness in an otherwise opaque public space. The Geschichtsmeile works because it is juxtaposed to an environment not designed for memory; the Topography of Terror site, in turn, already has precisely the kind of forethought and conscious shaping that the Geschichtsmeile tries to make up for, making a similar effort redundant.

The new landscape design of the Topography of Terror site has leveled most of the ground onto a flat surface, except for the trench that abuts Niederkirchnerstraße, and for a cluster of sunken ruins. The trench is now protected by a metal-and-glass canopy—a brighter, sleeker, more official-looking structure than the previous wooden cover (fig. 20). The muted color palette and emphasis on stark

Figure 20. Topography of Terror, exterior, detail (2010). On the upper part of the image, in the background, are the windows of the Nazi-built Aviation Ministry (now Finance Ministry). Immediately below, remains of the Berlin Wall. And below them, remains of the Gestapo building. In the foreground, the new glass-and-metal canopy. © Daniela Sandler
geometries give the site an abstract quality. The whole space reads as a mostly flat, gray expanse cut by geometric planes in different shades of gray and white: the right-angled sides of the building, the squares and diagonals of the landscape grounds. The site was planned with this idea of emptiness in mind. The building is a single flat volume, so as “to leave as much empty space as possible, and to allow for this emptiness to be experienced.”

The approach to the site, which Wilms defines as an “urban idea” (and not just as an architectural idea focused on the building as a single object), recalls the trope of the void, which was forged in discussions of how to represent the destruction and absence of Holocaust victims in memorials and buildings. This trope has become somewhat of a cliché, overused by architects and critics without necessarily advancing the original concept; as with all clichés, its original potency ends up somewhat devoid (pun intended). But also, as with all clichés, it maintains a measure of truth. The Topography of Terror site is indeed a site of voids: most of the buildings used by the Nazis were destroyed; the history and memory of the site were blank for almost half a century; and the whole site was a big hole in the urban fabric. Wilms and Hallmann’s design does not so much defer to this emptiness, but enhances it—the site looks much emptier today than it did when it housed the dumpster, the driving track, and even the temporary Topography of Terror exhibition. Crucially, Wilms does not describe this emptiness as merely spatial, but also as the symbolic condition that would allow for learning about the site’s history and reflecting on its social and individual implications:

Here it was the history of the site, and with it the responsibility for the legacy of our Nazi past—that was for me, for us, as Germans, the biggest challenge. . . . The core question for us was how to engage the highest number of people as possible, to get them involved. . . . Our formal answer was: openness, no barriers, light, and transparency (to bring history into the light of day, illuminate it, make it knowable).

The reference to light differentiates Wilms’s design from the usual rhetoric about architectural and memorial voids as negative spaces. The voids in Libeskind’s Jewish Museum or Eisenman’s Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe are in a sense black holes, referring to an absence that cannot be filled, sucking the visitor into anguished reflection. In Wilms’s case, the void is out in the open, bright, almost blindingly so (especially on a sunny day, when the metal, glass, and light gray stones are quite reflective of light). This is a void that exposes not only an absence but the

41. Ursula Wilms, interview via e-mail, September 23, 2014.
43. Ursula Wilms, interview via e-mail, September 23, 2014.
material traces of a history still present, in fragments, in ruins, in documents. Everything is out in the open, and the empty space makes room for reflection. This distinguishes Wilms’s use of emptiness from the clichéd void metaphor—this, and the intellectual (as opposed to emotional) tone of her design, which I will discuss below.

At the center of the site, removed from the street, is the single building of the documentation center, which houses a library, exhibition galleries, research and archive spaces, offices, and visitor facilities such as restrooms and a café. The building is a strict and minimal composition. The outer walls are metal screens, made of slim metal tubes placed horizontally, creating a carapace that protects a second, inner layer—this time, made of glass. In between the glass and the outer metal, there is a narrow space forming a screened peristyle with a floor of metal grilles. The building is a metal-and-glass cage elevated slightly above grade, clearly separate from the ground on which it stands. The outer carapace of the building appears as either transparent or opaque depending on one’s distance and angle of vision. When opaque, it looks like a gray envelope, neutral and forbidding, forming an almost blank backdrop to the open grounds—this enhances its alien quality, as if the building did not belong in there. From other angles, the building walls look diaphanous, semi-transparent, like very taut stretches of tulle fabric, hovering in front of the dark outlines of the interior spaces. The walls look like screens that slid into place, artificial separations that engage neither the inside nor the outside, but float in between them, immaterially. Whether perceived as opaque or transparent, the building’s outer envelope is pointedly removed and disconnected from its immediate surroundings.

This disconnection from the site was intentional, as the official presentation of the project suggests: “The cubical mass of the building ‘floats’ freely above the terrain, intentionally unaligned with any former structures or street axes on the site.”

Wilms was criticized for this disconnection, which is further enhanced by the building’s minimalist aesthetics—a strict geometry of right angles and unadorned surfaces that has been compared to the high modernist New National Gallery by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe nearby. Ana Souto, in her analysis of the site, argues that “the documentation centre could have been located anywhere in Berlin: there is no anchor with the site; the circulation is not encouraging the visitor to look outside and reflect on the fact that some of the events narrated in the exhibition did actually take place there.”

45. Malamud, “Meticulously Evil.”
magazine, bemoans the architecture for cleaning up a “‘dirty’ history.” These critics’ reactions reveal a contemporary sensibility primed by the activist approach to history, by site-specific conceptions of memory that owe much to Nora’s definition of lieux de mémoire, and by notions of authenticity. The Topography of Terror, in its earlier incarnation, set up expectations of what kind of configuration should define the site: rough, unstable, open-ended, and provisional. The public had accustomed its gaze to the overgrown site, and the sight of the organized and sleek new design has been all the more shocking for going against habit.

Against these expectations, and critiques, I argue that the new design offers a productive approach in the ways it engages, or refuses to engage, the “sense of place” of the site—and that it is precisely by subverting expectations, and frustrating the accustomed gaze of the public, that it might jolt visitors into a critical engagement with history. In the new Topography of Terror, the sense of history and authenticity is not provided ready-made for an immediate, sensuous experience; rather, the aloof and abstract quality of the building and landscape design require a stronger effort of reflection and imagination, of recalling historical connections in the mind’s eye instead of receiving them on one’s retina. This calling forth of participation is a tactic common to countermonuments, and it is worth remembering that many countermonuments resort precisely to abstraction in order to elicit engagement: from Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., to Jochen and Esther Gerz’s Monument against Fascism in Harburg, to Eisenman’s Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe.

The architect herself sees the building’s disconnection as a means to foreground the site and its history, not only in the present but also potentially in the future, if and when social needs and conditions change—a thought process very much aligned with the premise of the socially produced character of memory and memorials discussed in the previous chapter:

The building is almost a subordinate . . . addition to the land. The part of the building that sticks above ground is slightly elevated over the surface of the site, and it is purposefully not made of stone. This should underline that the building is an addition, and has no claims to eternal permanence. The building can be removed (if it doesn’t work anymore as a site for learning and memory), but the land and its history will remain, always. And with them, our responsibility.

It takes courage for a designer to envision a building in this potentially transitory, and somewhat self-effacing, way. Temporary, adaptable, and replaceable


49. Ursula Wilms, interview via e-mail, September 23, 2014.
Counterpreservation in Reverse

structures have been conceived before—notably by avant-gardes and visionaries, such as the Futurists in the early twentieth century, and the Metabolists, Archigram, Superstudio, and others in the 1960s. But in contemporary mainstream architecture—whether under the aegis of commercialism, the starchitecture economy, or sustainability—this attitude is rare. The lightness and flatness of Wilms’s design, its refusal to lay down deep foundations on the ground, remove any pretense that the architect’s reading should be a final or overriding voice in the public understandings of the site. At the same time, her design is no wallflower—it changed the configuration and overall form of the site radically and assertively, which is partly why it has irked critics such as Dawson and Souto.

Working closely with Wilms, landscape designer Heinz Hallmann composed an open space completely covered in sterile materials. The landscape of cement and gravel is one in which no further life can grow, in contrast to the previous exhibition, when the site offered grass-covered slopes and overgrown plants. Hallmann covers the terrain under an unforgiving gray seal, comparable in some ways to Libeskind’s waterland in the way it focuses attention on the historical charge of the site, preventing other uses that might normalize or obscure the memorial function of the land. It is in a way a cemetery, a gravel yard that alludes to death and circumspection. Unlike Libeskind’s waterland, though, Hallmann’s design carefully frames the extant remnants of Nazi structures. Swaths of gravel, patches of cement, and panes of glass surround tiled walls, metal beams, exposed staircases, and concrete columns. If Libeskind’s water would have been a dynamic and eroding medium, Hallmann’s sterile landscaping functions more like a solidifying resin, fixating and preserving the ruins as if they were insects caught in amber. This is not a precise metaphor, for most of the ruins are in fact uncovered (except for a few that had deteriorated in the first Topography of Terror exhibition and were covered to prevent their destruction). Not only are they accessible to touch; they are also exposed to the elements, and therefore to a slow but continuous process of degradation.

In a way, these are the paradoxical preserved ruins I discussed earlier in this book, the carefully cleaned and exposed shells of structures like the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche and the Franziskaner Klosterkirche. Indeed, the ruins of the Gestapo terrain are now scrubbed up and framed, rough-looking but otherwise contained and controlled fragments within an overarching design. But they are more than that, and cannot be considered as pretty, picturesque icons like the two church ruins mentioned above. The ruins in the Topography of Terror are carved out by chance, not by artful design; the landscaping follows their outlines, and not the other way around. Along Niederkirchnerstraße, the exhibition plaques make the context and background of these ruins clear. The glass canopy functions as a giant specimen glass, isolating the objects of scientific interest under a bright light (unlike the previous wooden cover, the glass canopy does not offer shade on sunny days). To the southwest of the building, another cluster of ruins disrupts
the ground, with underground columns and a descending staircase opening up a hole on the site. These ruins are surrounded by railings, keeping them from public access. This is a compromise necessary for public safety and preservation, but it is frustrating for the visitor, as these ruins beckon for direct exploration.

Near these ruins, a discreet monument marks the site of the former Gestapo House Prison cells. The ruins of these cells are buried underground, not exposed to the public, for preservation reasons; the only way to save these remnants was to hide them from view. On top of them, the gravel is interrupted by low slivers of concrete, which delineate a square outline and section off a portion of the ground. On the side of these low concrete bars, one can read, in German and in English: “On this site were cells of the House Prison at Gestapo Headquarters.” Historical representation is indirect, acknowledging the chasm between past and present—and dealing with the literal inaccessibility (and invisibility) of the original remains. One must get close to these concrete outlines to read the text, stepping over the gravel, away from the cement paving. It is an uncomfortable and difficult material on which to walk, serving as a metaphor for the process of engaging with this history, both on the location of this memorial and on the site as a whole. Most visitors keep to the cement paths instead, but there are no physical barriers, and in theory one could wander freely around the site in all directions over the gravel. Wilms envisioned this area as a place for lingering (there are benches nearby). In her words, “As a site of bodily and spiritual mishandling, this spot is almost the memorial place for the victims in the middle of the perpetrator site.” She added that “occasionally, people leave flowers there spontaneously” to commemorate these victims.⁵⁰

The ruins left on the site also evoke the memorial lexicon of concentration camp memorial sites, which often resort to displaying the distorted and partial remains of crematoria, gas chambers, barracks, and medical experiment halls. This is a reference that might belong in the visual subconscious of a considerable part of the public of this site—Germans who, as part of their school education, might be taken on concentration camp field trips, and tourists who might have visited other sites of Nazi terror besides the Topography. The visual similarity might not have been a conscious curatorial strategy, but it works as an easily understandable code for the tone of the site—and possibly for establishing a mental connection between Berlin and beyond, between the Gestapo ruins and the concentration camp ruins, just as there had been a connection between the Gestapo officers in Berlin and the concentration camp system as a whole.

When discussing the “rhetoric of ruins” in concentration camp memorial sites, focusing on Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau, Young recalls Nora’s concept of “places of memory” to assert that these sites are only meaningful as memorials because they have been socially constructed and framed as such—by governments,

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⁵⁰ Ibid.
institutions, visitors, and survivors. After considering the gulf of time that separates these sites from the horrors that once took place there, Young points out that “only a deliberate act of memory could reconnect them, reinfuse the sites with a sense of their historical past.”\(^51\) Without such deliberate acts, these ruins are meaningless, both as material remnants and as visual forms. However, Young goes on to note that, despite the constructedness of memorials and of memory itself, there remains a widely held social belief that these ruins are somehow animated by essential meanings that reside in them independently of human action or perception:

> Nevertheless, the magic of ruins persists, a near mystical fascination with sites seemingly charged with the aura of past events, as if the molecules of the sites still vibrated with the memory of their history. . . . As houses come to be “haunted” by the ghosts (memory, really) of their former occupants, the sites of destruction are haunted by phantoms of past events, no longer visible, but only remembered.\(^52\)

This is a belief in authenticity, in a genius loci—or maybe, more appropriately, in a phantasma loci. Young chooses his words carefully: “magic,” “mystical,” and “aura” all suggest that to see ruins as internally animated by intrinsic meaning, or memory, or ghosts, is to hold a supernatural belief, a matter of faith and not of reason or observation. Critics of the current Topography of Terror reveal such a belief by invoking the concept of authenticity, holding that the previous exhibition was true to the intrinsic powers and meanings of the site, its spirit, and that the current version is not. Take, for example, Souto’s observations, based on her phenomenological immersion in the site:

> The Topography of Terror has been transformed into a topography of control, of tidiness that does not connect with the site, with the authenticity of the location, with the weight that the past and collective memory should have in that particular place. . . . There is no sense of “terror” any more.\(^53\)

Souto focuses on the southwest corner of the site, where “the vegetation grows freely, out of control; signposts are non-existent even though there are remains of buildings. The authenticity of this corner is very strong, but not properly acknowledged.”\(^54\)

The concept of authenticity merits further discussion here. The idea of authenticity is grounded on notions of material presence, objectivity, archaeological value, and forensic verifiability. I do not dispute the validity of these methods and of their premises. But archaeology, material presence, and forensics belong in particular

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\(^{51}\) Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 119.

\(^{52}\) Ibid.

\(^{53}\) Souto, “Architecture and Memory,” 84.

\(^{54}\) Ibid.
epistemologies—which they not only serve, but also express. What is more, authen-
ticity connotes different meanings, and it is the conflation of these meanings that
can blur the lines between the faith in a “magic aura” and the archaeological or doc-
umentarian perspective. In the case of the Topography of Terror, there are several
competing epistemological approaches expressed by visitors, critics, members of
the foundation, curators, and others. Like crossed phone lines, these competing ap-
proaches sometimes blend different discourses, and one connotation of authenticity
slips into the other. It is thus important to untangle them. For historians in search
of material evidence and documentation, the site is a source for authentic artifacts
and vestiges. For architectural preservationists concerned with urban history, the
site represents an authentic location. For cultural critics such as Souto and Dawson,
visitors, or someone approaching the site as a symbolic place, it is the source of a dif-
ferent type of authenticity: the mystical, magical aura described by Young, which
goes beyond materiality or a geographical notation—beyond the topography—
and evokes the assumed true essence, the sense of the place. Hence Souto’s disap-
pointment that the “sense of ‘terror’” is gone. This is a complicated connotation of
authenticity based on personal and introspective experience—a subjective, multi-
valent, and constructed authenticity that paradoxically lays claim to a certain ver-
sion of facts by invoking an unquestionable truth (the very mention of the word
“authentic” suggests an authority of knowledge). One feels it, or doesn’t feel it, and
that becomes the yardstick. I do not mean that such a constructed authenticity has
no value or place, because it does perform an important role in social and individual
rituals of memorialization. But it is also a narrative, socially and historically contin-
gent. A site that purports to enact such authenticity might be effective emotionally,
but it also might obscure other ways of engagement with history—say, research,
reflection, critique, discussion—creating an experiential sense of accuracy without
furthering historical knowledge or insight.

I do not want to dismiss Souto’s point entirely, but rather only nuance it. If her
argument about authenticity is problematic, she also at the same time offers a valu-
able analytical model through her phenomenological approach. As Souto suggests
in her exploration of the site, the embodied, spatial perception of places is an im-
portant component in the social and individual construction of memories and, ulti-
mately, also in the process of memory-work. On this count, the new Topography of
Terror indeed falls short compared to the immersive environment of the previous
exhibition. The design of the landscape, open and easily readable, with clear paths
and signage, leaves little room for mystery or for the imagination, but rather lays
out its elements as a clear, brightly lit “spatial text”: it is a site for the intellect. The
building repeats the motif of objective presentation combined with a call for critical
reflection: first, it presents visitors with a rationally organized space, easy to navi-
gate, with ample room for circulation along exhibition displays. The building and
its contents, down to the furniture, are placed on an implicit grid—the modernist
matrix of rationality. At the same time, the harsh ground covering, grayness, and
The space of clarity, of scientific exposition embodied in the building, converges in the interior courtyard—an open square in the middle of the building, lined by glass walls and surrounded by benches, with a shallow pool of water at the center (fig. 21). This is a space for meditation, which recalls Zen gardens with its abstract and artful combination of materials (stone, cement, glass, water), and the simplicity of design that heightens the always-changing effects of natural elements: the wind causing ripples on the water, the sun casting bright lights and dense shadows. It is a jewel box of a courtyard, and as it interrupts the interior space it seems to offer a respite, a punctuation mark, a point where one can rest from the exhibition texts and images—perhaps simply to take a break, perhaps to reflect and meditate (it is also functional, as it allows natural daylight and ventilation into the exhibition spaces of the building). This is a building for scientific exposition, for the rational
communication of knowledge, and (in the courtyard) for the thoughtful reflection on the knowledge that was imparted. It is not a building for synesthetic experiences, for tactile opportunities, for an engagement of the body and the senses in space and time. The building materials are cool and weightless, without thickness, without mass; the glass and metal are like membranes, immaterial, disembodied; they are not solid and enveloping like thick walls or foundations.

The abandoned design by Zumthor would have offered the opposite type of space, following the kind of phenomenological experience that Souto defends. Zumthor’s architecture and writings have become known precisely for his attention to phenomenology, the body, the senses beyond intellectual cognition and detached vision. Models of his unbuilt proposal represent a building with poignant, engulfing plays of light and shadow. The building would have consisted of a monumental rectangular block, its walls made of repeated supporting columns, slim and tall, creating a screen on the outside perimeter. In between these columns, there would have been glass, forming very tall and narrow windows that would have let in light dramatically, almost like a blown-up prison cell. This simple exterior shell would have housed discrete, enclosed volumes and rooms inside, providing an “enveloping space” or “buffer zone” (in Zumthor’s own words) that would have gathered exhibition spaces, visitor facilities, and the Gestapo ruins. This “enveloping space” would have formed a cavernous, awe-inspiring interior, flanked by the rhythmic patterns of the lanky pillars and windows of the exterior shell.

Although Zumthor highlighted that “one of the basic concepts of the project was to have an outside view available from every part of the building,” which the tall windows would have allowed for, the structural screen would always have framed these views within its inevitable vertical lines, slicing off the outside panorama and drawing one’s eyes upward. Materials would have been left bare (“nothing is covered, plastered or concealed”), enhancing the tactile dimension of the space. The linear and narrow building, with its sculptural unfolding of enclosed rooms and circulation spaces inside a monumental envelope, would probably have afforded visitors a more subjective, emotional, and immersive experience. Its dramatic height and weighty material presence would have had a temple-like quality. It is easy to see how it might have competed with the contents of the exhibition and the site itself, as the foundation directors feared; and it is easy to understand why they adopted Wilms’s lightweight, antimonumental design.

55. See, for instance, Peter Zumthor, Atmospheres (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2006).
57. Zumthor, “‘Topography of Terror’ Berlin,” 53.
58. Ibid.
Aloof Architecture

While in some cases a disconnection from context could be faulted for historical ignorance and a generic approach, in the case of the new Topography of Terror, the refusal to engage the context—sight lines, angles, and footprints of previous or existing buildings—is a conscious statement about the function of a documentation and exhibition center as a place of reflection on historical narratives that are always already mediated, separated from the present by time and representational technologies. One can have expansive views of the outside from within the building, although these views are always veiled by the metal screens around the building; depending on the angle and proximity, the veiling is more perceptible or else less obtrusive. These views are meant to “establish the connection to the ‘here and now,’ to the self.” Wilms sought to convey that the history of the site is inseparable from the lives that go on outside of it: “The history, which one can discover in the permanent exhibition inside the building, is not detached from us, but bound up with us. For this reason the building is transparent from the inside out.”

At the same time, these views are filtered through the metal screens, interrupted by shadows or reflections on the glass. The visitor needs to work to discern the visual information beyond the screens—as opposed to a crystal-clear panoramic view that a picture window would have offered. In other words, there is always a sense of mediation.

This distance between the building and the site is also suggested by the curatorial orientation of the exhibition, which has eschewed artifacts in favor of narrative texts and images based on historical documentation. The detachment of the building avoids any possible impression that one can be immersed into a seemingly historical experience, engulfed in an authentic or original environment, as if breathing the air of the past along with its sights. Such an experience would be unavoidably a simulation, with an emphasis on the senses and an illusion of immediacy with the past and its historical vestiges. These immersive experiences offer the much-maligned “Disneyfied” version of history that some have condemned in reconstructed historical environments and newly built places such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

I do not mean to say that an immersion in historical environments or remnants is always or essentially a problem—there is indeed something very powerful about walking into the musty barracks of Auschwitz-Birkenau, even if some of them have actually been reconstructed. But at the Topography of Terror, immersion in the open wound site would belie the fact not only that there are very few and fragmented remnants of the original Prinz-Albrecht block, but also that the site endured a suffocating collective forgetting over almost forty years in the postwar era.

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60. Ursula Wilms, interview via e-mail, September 23, 2014.
61. Thomas Lutz, head of the memorial-museums department of the Topography of Terror, quoted by Malamud, “Meticulously Evil.”
The cool remove of Wilms and Hallmann’s design does justice to this prolonged social erasure—this forgetting, more than the war destruction, is embodied by the new design. The danger of the collective effacement of histories and memories by a whole society is an equally pressing warning as the danger of oppression and war. While the open wound might have soothed a collective conscience with reassuring proof of historical engagement, offering a kind of redemption, the flat gray field denies this moral gratification.

How can one define the “authenticity of the site”? Is it the evocation of the time when the Gestapo and other Nazi institutions were still standing there in full operation? Or of the moment of their postwar destruction, and later oblivion? Or of the recovery of their memory, and the moment of historical activism? Malamud is one of the few critics who hinted at the slipperiness of notions of an “original” historical referent by recognizing the critical potential of Wilms’s detached architecture:

> It’s hard to imagine, walking through the ultramodern space, what the “topography” must have looked like back in the 1930s, and I think that’s exactly the architect Ursula Wilms’s intention as she superimposes our contemporary style, our presence, on top of the historical specter.

The aloofness of Wilms’s building and Hallmann’s landscaping deny facile impressions of historical awareness or immediacy, and instead require more from visitors—that we work hard to conjure up a vision of the past based on the informational texts and images from the exhibition, that we piece together the contents of the exhibition next to the context of the urban surroundings, and that we turn our attention to our thoughts as a response to the site instead of melding our bodies and senses there. By refusing to provide the sense of authenticity and contextual immersion that the public has come to expect, the new site offers a precious chance at disrupting mainstream expectations and providing a less scripted historical experience.

The different incarnations of the Topography of Terror—the previous exhibition, Zumthor’s unbuilt design, and the current configuration—pit two memorial approaches against each other: on the one hand, a sensorial and even figurative experience of history, subjective, emotional, immersive; on the other hand, the intellectual and reflective stance, objective, cool, detached. If we probe this to an extreme, we might ask whether the immersive experience distracts from intellectual reflection by providing a cathartic sense of “living history,” which exhausts itself as a self-contained moment of awareness instead of prompting long-lasting reflections or further research. Henri-Pierre Jeudy asked the same question of French “ecomuseums,” immersive reconstructions of historical environments complete with tools, everyday artifacts, and even actors in period dress, which for him were a

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63. Malamud, “Meticulously Evil.”
reductive and prescriptive way of representing history to contemporary audiences. Jeudy instead favored sites where visitors could roam free among untouched, decaying ruins (for example, industrial ruins), and where the engagement with the past would be as open to free associations and individual initiative as the physical exploration of these places. This is a position similar to that of Tim Edensor, in his analyses of abandoned industrial ruins in England.64

At first sight one might use Jeudy and Edensor to make a case for the former incarnation of the Topography of Terror—and indeed, in its origins, the grassroots exhibition exemplified the free exploration and possibilities for discovery and new meaning that these two authors see in abandoned ruins. This was the case in the late 1970s, when the site was first rediscovered; it was the case in the 1980s, when it was the object of further excavations and activism; and it was even still the case in 1987, when the first temporary exhibition was set up. But ten or fifteen years later, was the exhibition as free for the roaming—the meanings as free for the taking—as they had been initially? There was already something codified and fixed through the continued existence of the exhibition, through its repeated visita-
tion, through its recurring appearance in news stories, tours and guidebooks, and scholarly works.

When I first visited the site in 2002, although it was thrilling in some ways—not least because popular reports and critical literature had prepped me to encounter the exhibition as participatory, dynamic, and subversive—it already did not appear to be as open-ended and in-progress anymore. The exhibition facilities were slightly less makeshift, the public spotlight had lifted the place into the mainstream, and many portions of the site, including some of the ruins, were not accessible anymore. The inaugural exhibition, which had been housed inside a temporary building, had long been dismantled. But most of all, much as I wished to partake in the “dig-where-you-stand,” collective history-making of the 1980s, that moment and that experience were inevitably gone. The Topography of Terror was also, and already, a simulacrum of a previous experience, and a witness not only to the Nazi past of the site, but also to the unique moment of its rediscovery—which itself has become a myth. The new Topography of Terror does not pay homage to this myth (perhaps a different design could have, or perhaps the very requirement of a permanent layout for the site precluded this), and an unacknowledged nostalgia for that mythical moment is possibly behind the critics’ laments that the new design is too neat and tidy.

The Topography of Terror is no longer an example of counterpreservation as I have defined it. Even if it had been kept in its “open wound” state, it might still not have fulfilled the dynamic and open-ended promises of counterpreservation because of the ways in which the experience of the site had been scripted and codified.

through public reception and critical literature, as I argued above. The presence of decay, decrepitude, and free ruins is not in itself synonymous with counterpreservation. In the introduction to this book, I defined the concept as necessarily grounded on social practices—community initiatives, activist movements, symbolic discussions. These practices might be concerned with socioeconomic inclusion, as in the case of the Hausprojekte in chapter 1; or with creative freedom and a critical representation of history, as in the case of the cultural and art centers of chapter 2; or with the possibility for a dynamic engagement with memory, as in Libeskind’s Project MoKerning. Without these social practices and social meanings, decaying sites are just that—heaps of stone in a landscape, as Young would say. Conversely, radical decay is not necessary for a complex and participatory approach to history, as demonstrated by the new Topography of Terror.