Urban Memory and Visual Culture in Berlin

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Conclusion

The Collectives of Contemporary Urban Memory

In the conclusion of her 2005 book, *The New Berlin*, Karen Till reproduces her 2002 fieldnotes about her return to the Topography of Terror (a place to which she is drawn whenever she is in the city). At that time, it remained ‘incomplete’, the provisional cement walls of the proposed Zumthor building concealed behind a wooden fence. The fence was the site of an exhibition addressing questions of racism and prejudice in contemporary Germany. Till concludes her reflections on this exhibition, and its location on the margins of the ‘spectacle advertised by city marketers’, with the following remarks which, on the one hand, unintentionally echo Wim Wenders while self-consciously invoking Walter Benjamin:

Walking through this space, citizens and visitors were asked to look critically at their performances in the staging of a Weltstadt, to relate their everyday urban experiences to those of others living in the past, present and future. In doing so, some individuals may have experienced a momentary shock of recognition, an awakening to the not yet conscious knowledge of the ‘what has been’ in the now. [my italics - SW]

Given the Benjaminian inflection of her concluding words, perhaps the most striking aspect of Till’s imagined scenario is the absence of a collective. The order in which this ‘shock’ works, according to Till, is also interesting: conscious critical reflection generates the as yet unconscious awareness of asynchronicity. For Wim Wenders, by contrast, Berlin’s wounds were able to generate the experience of asynchronicity themselves for ‘the visitor and the people of Berlin’. [again my italics - SW]

The ‘and’ of Wenders and Till ostensibly frames the citizens of Berlin and its tourists as a collective. This is why we have needed this term, ‘urban memory’, to describe the difference to place memory. If place memory, in Connerton’s and Halbwachs’s models, was always collective, then in order to describe a place memory that is always and already ‘artificial’ because it is not (necessarily) rooted in local experience, what are the collective coordinates of an urban memory? As the leaflet to ‘The Original Walking Tours in English’ puts it: ‘We all know it happened in Berlin, but WHERE?’ This is not only an invocation of a collective, but it also demonstrates, as does Connerton’s work, that there is an undeniable contemporary thirst
for the experience of place, which Berlin promises to assuage. Hence the
ongoing collection, curation, and exhibition of the any-space-whatevers of
Berlin, and the production of spatial images.

Paul Connerton's assertion that 'modernity forgets', with which we began
this study, needs to be revised. It fails to recognize that modernity, in spite
of its forces of erasure, does not create a space 'wiped [entirely] clean'.
Instead, the remnants and empty space left behind represent a potential.
The material remnants at Potsdamer Platz, such as these fragments of
Wall incorporated within the new Ministry for the Environment are
manifold – and this does not begin to count the fragments of imitation or
real wall on display in the most unlikely places in Berlin, be it in Shoe City
at Alexanderplatz, the Europa Center close to the Kaiser William Memorial
Church or those cocoa-solid slabs of pseudo-Wall on sale in the upmarket
chocolatier Fassbender & Rausch at the Gendarmenmarkt. Yet, as this book
has argued throughout, the material remnant has been a central element
in an encounter with the past that has been a trigger to remembering. The
fragment, however, is not self-sufficient; its critical potential can only unfold
if the dynamics of place memory are put in place. Here the Wall fragment
fulfils precisely what Janet Ward criticizes as the 'petrification' of remains.

This collective of consumers of the past must be read alongside the col-
lective that is formed by the encounter with the past, and in conclusion I
want to compare two particular spatial images of the urban past that date
from the end date in this book's title, 2012 – also the year in which Ramberg's
immaterial archive of the Palace of the Republic vanished into cyberspace.

The first of these is a marginal form of commemoration created for the
celebrations of the 775th anniversary of Berlin's founding in 2012. The an-
niversary was an event that incorporated many of the strategies of 'memory
value' that we have seen develop throughout this book. In 2008, Dieter
Hoffmann-Axthelm edited a collection of essays for the journal Ästhetik
und Kommunikation under the title, 'Amoklauf des Gedenkens', which
bemoaned the omnipresence of an unreflective memory culture in the city
of Berlin and beyond. This celebration of 2012 could be read as a symptom
of the normative dominance of 'cultural memory' in the reaffirmation of a
(relatively simplistic) narrative of continuity about the city. As one might
expect, the 'event' was a key form of collective urban experience during
the celebrations, following on from our discussion of this in Chapter Four,
in relation to Christo's 'Wrapped Reichstag'.

The slogan for the commemorations was 'Grund zum Feiern?' ('A Reason
to Celebrate?'), whose question mark indicated perhaps an uncertainty about
having another city anniversary only 25 years after the previous one. One
less obvious form of commemoration of place spoke quite specifically to this slogan that plays on the double meaning of Grund as both ‘reason’, i.e. a reason to celebrate, but also ‘ground’ as something quite material, i.e. the material city as the source, root, and origin of the commemoration. In the summer of 2012, I came out of the Stadtbibliothek in the Breite Strasse and encountered this (Fig. 18) printed on the pavement:

While this might seem like a form of official, legitimized graffiti, a ‘defacing’ of the cityscape that can of course be found throughout Berlin, it is actually, also, a further application of the palimpsest principle. It is an example of how official practices have adapted artistic strategies – in this case the Stolpersteine (stumble-stones) which are mini-plaques to be found on the pavements of Berlin, recalling former residents who were victims of the National Socialist regime’s policies. In the 2012 version, the ‘ground’ is made to ‘speak’, here, not through a plaque, or stumble stone, but through a self-consciously provisional micro-narrative of the spatial practices of the past. It is a cultural memory for the location, predicated, as we have argued throughout this book, on the dynamics of place memory.

This disruption of urban spatial practice has now become a codified means of framing cultural memory. There were a large number of this kind
of short sentence printed on the streets of ‘Old Berlin’ for the commemoration, some of which appeared as fragments from ‘old-style’ chronicles, others more explicitly naming dates and activities for which this site was the particular grounds. What is at stake here? While it is tempting to decode a narrative of cultural memory that leaps back over the centuries to reassert a ‘normal’ urban continuity, something that was arguably at stake in both East and West in 1987, what actually connects the activities of the practices of 1987 and 2012, for example, is their use of the dynamics of place memory in the city.

The museal urban gaze and its modulation of attention is now paradigmatic and embedded into the structure of the city and its display of urban continuity, founded on a narrative of a natural urban history which rather undoes the paradigm of ‘critical memory value’, which, as we can recall from Chapter Two, involves making the historical process visible. The printed words on the street will gradually fade and become invisible, and will not remain as an obstacle, as the material remnant might. The seamless musealization of the city, and its natural philosophy of urban history, its framing of the urban past as a directed visual consumption – ‘See what is left of the 1000 year Reich [...] See the exact position of Hitler’s bunker’, as the Walking Tours leaflet promises – might lead one to a rather pessimistic conclusion.

In the spirit of optimism, let me offer a counter-example with which to conclude. It might seem that with the establishment of the Humboldt-Forum on Schlossplatz, initially in the form of a corner fragment that echoed the fragment of Schinkel’s Bauakademie on the far side of that same Platz, the potential for urban memory in the encounter with fragmented, incomplete urban spaces might be vanishing in Berlin.

In the summer of 2012, however, the Spanish artist, Juan Garaizabal, found yet one more overlooked place in the east of the city centre, on the corner of Mauerstrasse/Krausenstrasse, just round the corner from Friedrichstrasse. As the exhibition leaflet described it, Garaizabal’s sculpture ‘brought the Bethlehem Church, destroyed in the Second World War, back to its proper place.’ He did, not, however, reconstruct the church, but constructed the frame of the building out of metal, so that it stood, as a fragile skeleton on its former location (Fig. 19). Not far from the sculpture, in the Museum for Communication on the Leipziger Strasse, an accompanying exhibition, not unlike the model used by Boltanski’s ‘Missing House’ project, gathered together some of the artist’s research, drafts, models, and sketches, as well as historical photographs which, again according to the leaflet, ‘make this lost monument’s history feel tangible.’ While it seems a little unfair to
take the verbal explication of the work to task, it is important to note how the photograph is accorded the potential of evoking place memory. The installation is more interesting than its textual supplement. For while the leaflet again suggested that the sculpture ‘remembers the friendly relations between Prussia and the Bohemian refugees, for whom the church was built in 1737’, nothing at the site actually makes this connection explicit. What

instead the installation enables (it is still standing) is an encounter with place: the city as museum, but in the form of an urban museum, in which the modes of encountering the city are also incorporated. It is not a Stolperstein, but permanently incomplete, composed not only out of the immateriality of light and air, by the trigger of the outline of the structure which is not only visible in the metal forms, but also, importantly, on the ground, which traces the ground plan of the former church, in an ironic echo of the Planwerk Innenstadt’s insistence on recreating solid, material structures on the basis of the former city’s street structures. With Garazaibal’s work, we are back with Halbwachs, in the sacred structures of collective place memory that we discussed in the introduction. Garazaibal’s work not only invokes a narrative of cultural memory that brings us back to the globally inclusive community envisaged by Libeskind at the start of this chapter, but it also forms a collective for that narrative, a transient, migratory collective that might stop and wo/ander in this curious gap in the cityscape. We might recuperate the word ‘denizens’ in its historical sense to denote those who are accorded rights without belonging to a place, to describe this collective.

‘Memoria Urbana’ is predicated on the dynamics of place memory. The installation provides an encounter with place, indeed a remembrance of place memory’s dynamics. ‘Memoria Urbana’, an encounter framed in Berlin beyond monocultural language, an urban place not to dwell, but to pass through. Garazaibal’s installation also offers one solution to the question of what constitutes memory for an urban collective. In ‘Memoria Urbana’, the figures of the inhabitant and the visitor are also combined in the migrant artist who participates in the curation of the cityscape and whose work is welcomed into the city archive.4

We have seen a constant interaction between unofficial and official cultures of memory production, and more experimental forms of visual cultural engagement with the city, most notably in the paradigm of the urban palimpsest, understood as a visual encounter with material, rather than a simple decoding of verbal traces. The work of Garazaibal, and its incorporation into the city’s official archive, demonstrates the crucial role of critical visual practice in the shaping of the city’s memory culture. In tracing that culture’s emergence over the past fifty years, we have observed the role which artists and photographers have played in shaping the museal urban gaze since it was initially formulated by Wolf Jobst Siedler and Elisabeth Niggemeyer in explicit response to the impositions of the synchronic urban gaze on post-war Berlin. The cultural practices of collectors, curators, and exhibitors of the city’s repository have often been initiated and reflected upon by cultural producers, who take on and define the task of producing
the spatial images, which then become part of the institutional framework of urban memory. These playful cultural producers are of course not to be thought in opposition to the dealers in the exchange value of space, but their relationship is also not an easy collaboration, as they produce a frame of attention that has to be produced at odds with the prevailing conditions of the contemporary city.

In his 1985 film essay As One Sees (Wie man sieht), Harun Farocki reflects on how a city emerges out of an encounter that is different from the instrumentalizing military and economic gaze. ‘A beautiful notion: the traveller pauses at the crossroads in order to think through in the present moment the possible origins and destinations. The city emerges as a result of this pausing for thought and reflection.’

If urban culture emerges in spatial interstices, then its temporal locus is the moment of reflection around which a collective might form, a moment of reflection put in place by artists and architects who come to Berlin to shape its urban memory culture from all over the globe, as a brief list of those discussed here illustrates: Garazaibal (Spain), Boltanski (Switzerland), Attie and Libeskind (USA). The critical practice of urban memory has to keep open the possibility of a collective resistance or some kind of obstacle to the process of synchronization. Divested of a nostalgic longing for authentic place, it can be a tool for continuing to generate vigilance towards the cityscape that is encountered (begegnet) as an indirect object, and towards the discontinuities and asynchronicities of urban time and space.