PRESENT PASTS

*Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*

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*Stanford University Press*
*Stanford, California*
*2003*
others as any monumentalism has ever been. Significantly, however, the Telekom ad cannot do without a national monument: it enlists the Brandenburg Gate as a trademark for “made in Germany.” Whether the information traffic to the future will be in the fast lane or whether it will generate brain jam on a monumental scale remains to be seen.

Only the future will tell whether it was worth being seduced.

The Voids of Berlin

Eight years after the fall of the Wall, seven years after the unification of East and West Germany, and just a couple of years before the final transfer of the national government from Bonn to the city on the Spree, Berlin is a city text frantically being written and rewritten. As Berlin has left behind its heroic and propagandistic role as flash point of the Cold War and struggles to imagine itself as the new capital of a reunited nation, the city has become something like a prism through which we can focus issues of contemporary urbanism and architecture, national identity and statehood, historical memory and forgetting. Architecture has always been deeply invested in the shaping of political and national identities, and the rebuilding of Berlin as capital of Germany gives us significant clues to the state of the German nation after the fall of the Wall and about the ways it projects its future.

As a literary critic I am naturally attracted to the notion of the city as text, of reading a city as a conglomerate of signs. Mindful of Italo Calvino’s marvelously suggestive Invisible Cities, we know how real and imaginary spaces commingle in the mind to shape our notions of specific cities. No matter where we begin our discussion of the city of signs—whether with Victor Hugo’s reading Paris in Notre Dame de Paris as a book written in stone, with Alfred Döblin’s attempt, in Berlin Alexanderplatz, to
create a montage of multiple city discourses jostling against each other like passers-by on a crowded sidewalk, with Walter Benjamin's notion of the flaneur reading urban objects in commemorative meditation, with Robert Venturi's upbeat emphasis on architecture as image, meaning, and communication, with Roland Barthes's city semiotics of the Empire of Signs, with Thomas Pynchon's TV-screen city, or with Jean Baudrillard's aesthetic transfiguration of an immaterial New York—a few things should be remembered: The trope of the city as book or as text has existed as long as we have had a modern city literature. There is nothing particularly novel or postmodern about it. On the other hand, one may want to ask why this notion of the city as sign and text assumed such critical mass in the architectural discourse of the 1970s and 1980s, arguably the high time of an architectural obsession with semiotics, rhetorics, and codings that underwrote much of the debate about architectural postmodernism. Whatever the explanation may be—and surely, there is no one simple answer to this question—it seems clear that today this interest in the city as sign, as text, is waning in much architectural discourse and practice, both of which have by and large turned against an earlier fascination with literary and linguistic models, no doubt at least partially as a result of the new image-graphing technologies offered by ever more powerful computers. The notion of the city as sign, however, is as pertinent as before, though perhaps more now in a pictorial and imagistic rather than a textual sense. But this shift from script to image comes with a significant reversal. Put bluntly: The discourse of the city as text in the 1970s was primarily a critical discourse involving architects, literary critics, theorists, and philosophers bent on exploring and creating the new vocabularies of urban space after modernism. The current discourse of the city as image is one of "city fathers," developers, and politicians trying to increase revenue from mass tourism, conventions, and office or commercial rental. Central to this new kind of urban politics are aesthetic spaces for cultural consumption, megastores and blockbuster museal events, Festspiele and spectacles of all kinds, all intended to lure that new species of the city-tourist, the urban vacationer or even the metropolitan marathoner, who has replaced the older leisurely flaneur. The flaneur, though always something of an outsider in his city, was still figured as a dweller rather than as a traveler on the move. But today it is the tourist rather than the flaneur to whom the new city culture wants to appeal—even as it fears the tourist's underside, the displaced and illegal migrant.

There is a clear downside to this notion of the city as sign and image in our global culture, nowhere as visible to me as in a recent front-page article in the New York Times in which the paper's art critic celebrated the newly Disneyfied and theme-parked Times Square as the ultimate example of a commercial billboard culture that has now, in this critic's skewed view, become indistinguishable from real art. One can only hope that the transformation of Times Square from a haven for hustlers, prostitutes, and junkies into a pop art installation will not presage the wholesale transformation of Manhattan into a museum, a process already far advanced in some older European cities.

This brings me back to Berlin, a city justly famous for its glorious museum collections, but, owing mainly to its decenteredness and vast extension, much less liable to turn into an urban museum space such as the centers of Rome, Paris, or even London have become in recent decades. Thus it is no big surprise to me that after an upsurge in the early 1990s, tourism to Berlin is significantly down. This slump may of course have something to do with the fact that Berlin is currently the most energized site for new urban construction anywhere in the Western world: enormously exciting for people interested in architecture and urban transformation, but for most others mainly an insufferable mess of dirt, noise, and traffic jams. Once all this construction has been completed, this is the hope, Berlin will take its rightful place as a European capital next to its more glamorous competitors. But will it? After all, Berlin is in significant ways different from other Western European capitals, in terms of its history as capital and as an industrial center as well as in terms of its building substance. And the fact that the city is now caught between the pressures of this new urban image politics and the more general crisis of architectural developments at the millennium's end makes any such hope appear simply misplaced if not deluded. I do think that Berlin is the place to study how this new emphasis on the city as cultural sign, combined with its role as capital and the pressures of large-scale developments, prevents creative alternatives and thus represents a false start into the twenty-first century. In short, Berlin may be well on the way to squandering a unique chance.

II

There is perhaps no other major Western city that bears the marks of twentieth-century history as intensely and self-consciously as Berlin. This city text has been written, erased, and rewritten throughout that violent
Berlin as a city that for so long had stood in the dead eye of the storm of politics in this century. Empire, war and revolution, democracy, fascism, Stalinism, and the Cold War all were played out here. Indelibly etched into our memory is the idea of Berlin as the capital site of a discontinuous, ruptured history, of the collapse of four successive German states; Berlin as ground of literary expressionism and the revolt against the old order; Berlin as epicenter of the vibrant cultural avant-gardism of Weimar and its elimination by Nazism; Berlin as command center of world war and the Holocaust; and, finally, Berlin as symbolic space of the East-West confrontation of the nuclear age with American and Soviet tanks staring each other down at Checkpoint Charlie, which is now being turned into an American business center watched over, temporarily, by a towering photographic cutout of Philip Johnson and a shrunken, gilded Statue of Liberty placed atop the former East German watchtower.

If, at that confusing and exhilarating time after the fall of the Wall, Berlin seemed saturated with memories, the years since then have also taught us multiple lessons about the politics of willful forgetting: the imposed and often petty renaming of streets in East Berlin that were given century, and its legibility relies as much on visible markers of built space as on images and memories repressed and ruptured by traumatic events. Part palimpsest, part Wunderblock, Berlin now finds itself in a frenzy of future projections and, in line with the general memorial obsessions of the 1990s, in the midst of equally intense debates about how to negotiate its Nazi and communist pasts, now that the safe dichotomies of the Cold War have vanished. The city is obsessed with architectural and planning issues, a debate that functions like a prism refracting the pitfalls of urban development at this turn of the century. All of this in the midst of a government- and corporation-run building boom of truly monumental proportions.

Nothing less is the goal than to create the capital of the twenty-first century, but this vision finds itself persistently haunted by the past.

Berlin as text remains first and foremost historical text, marked as much, if not more, by absences as by the visible presence of its past, from prominent ruins such as the Gedächtniskirche at the end of the famous Kurfürstendamm to World War II bullet and shrapnel marks on many of its buildings. It was in the months after the collapse of the East German state that our sensibility for the past of this city was perhaps most acute, a
back their presocialist, and often decidedly antisocialist, cast, the dismantling of monuments to socialism, the absurd debate about tearing down the GDR's Palace of the Republic to make room for a rebuilding of the Hohenzollern palace, and so forth. This was not just tinkering with the communist city text. It was a strategy of power and humiliation, a final burst of Cold War ideology, pursued via a politics of signs, much of it wholly unnecessary and with predictable political fallout in an East German population that felt increasingly deprived of its life history and of its memories of four decades of separate development. Even though not all the plans to dismantle monuments and to rename streets came to fruition, the damage was done. GDR nostalgia and an upsurge in popularity for the revamped Communist Party (PDS) were the inevitable political results, even among many in the younger generation who had been active in the opposition to the state in the 1980s.

Forgetting is equally privileged in an official ad campaign of 1996, literally written all over the city: BERLIN WIRD—BERLIN BECOMES. But "becomes what"? Instead of a proper object, we get a verbal void: This phrasing may reflect wise precaution, for in the current chaos of public planning, backdoor scheming, and contradictory politicking, with many architectural developments (Spreeinsel and Alexanderplatz among them) still hanging in the air and their feasibility and financing insecure, nobody seems to know exactly what Berlin will become. But the optimistic subtext of the ellipsis is quite clear, and radically opposed to Karl Scheffler's 1910 lament that it is the tragic destiny of Berlin "forever to become and never to be." Too much of the current construction and planning actually lacks the very dynamism and energy of turn-of-the-century Berlin that Scheffler, ever the cultural pessimist, lamented. Since much of central Berlin in the mid-1990s is a gigantic construction site, a hole in the ground, a void, there are ample reasons to emphasize the void rather than to celebrate Berlin's current state of becoming.

III

The notion of Berlin as a void is more than a metaphor, and it is not just a transitory condition. It does carry historical connotations. Already in 1935, the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, in his Erbschaft dieser Zeit, described life in Weimar Berlin as "functions in a void." He was referring to the vacuum left by the collapse of an earlier, nineteenth-century bourgeois culture, which had found its spatial expression in the heavy ornamental stone architecture of Berlin's unique apartment buildings, the pejoratively called Miethäusern (rent barracks), with their multiple wings in the back, their so-called Hinterhütser enclosing inner courtyards accessible from the street only through tunnel-like archways. The post–World War I vacuum was filled by a functionalist and, to Bloch, insubstantial culture of distraction: Weimar modernism, the movie palaces, the six-day bicycle races, the new modernist architecture, the glitz and glamour of the so-called stabilization phase before the 1929 crash. Bloch's phrase "functions in the void" also articulated the insight that in the age of monopoly capitalism, built city space could no longer command the representative functions of an earlier age. As Brecht put it in those same years, when he discussed the need for a new, postmimetic realism: reality itself had become functional, thus requiring entirely new modes of representation.

A little over a decade later, it was left to fascism to transform Berlin into the literal void that was the landscape of ruins of 1945. Especially in the center of Berlin, British and American bombers had joined forces with Albert Speer's wrecking crews to create a tabula rasa for Germania, the renamed capital of a victorious Reich. And the creation of voids did not stop then; it continued through the 1950s under the heading of Sanierung, when entire quarters of the old Berlin were razed to make room for the simplistic versions of modern architecture and planning characteristic of the times. The major construction project of the postwar period, the Wall, needed another void, that of the no-man's-land and the minefields that wound their way through the very center of the city and held its Western part in a tight embrace.

All of West Berlin itself always appeared as a void on Eastern European maps: West Berlin of the Cold War as the hole in the Eastern European cheese. Likewise weather maps on West German television for a long time represented the GDR as an absence, a blank space surrounding the Frontstadt Berlin, the capitalist cheese in the real existing void.

When the Wall came down, Berlin added another chapter to its narrative of voids, a chapter that brought back shadows of the past and spooky revenants. For a couple of years, this very center of Berlin, the threshold between the Eastern and the Western parts of the city, was a seventeen-acre wasteland that extended from the Brandenburg Gate down to Potsdamer and Leipziger Platz, a wide stretch of dirt, grass, and remnants of former pavement under a big sky that seemed even bigger given...
the absence of any high-rise skyline so characteristic of this city. Berliners
called it affectionately their “wonderful city steppes,” their “prairie of his-
tory.” It was a haunting space, crisscrossed by a maze of footpaths going
nowhere. One slight elevation marked the remnants of the bunker of
Hitler’s SS guard, which after having been reopened once the Wall came
down was soon sealed shut again by the city authorities to avoid making it
into a site of neo-Nazi pilgrimage. Walking across this space that had been
a mined no-man’s-land framed by the Wall and that now served occasion-
ally as a staging site for rock concerts and other transitory cultural attrac-

FIGURE 3.3 Wall area between Leipziger Platz and Brandenburg Gate. Courtesy
Architecture Slide Library, Columbia University.
tions, I could not help remembering that this tabula rasa had once been the site of Hitler’s Reichskanzlei and the space to be occupied by Speer’s megalomaniac north-south axis with the Great Hall in the north and Hitler’s triumphal arch in the south, the power center of the empire of a thousand years, all to be completed by 1950.

In the summer of 1991, when most of the Wall had already been removed, auctioned off, or sold to tourists in bits and pieces, the area was studded with the Wall’s steel rods left by the Muerspechte, the wall peckers, and decorated with colorful triangular paper leaves that were blowing and rustling in the wind: they powerfully marked the void as second nature and as memorial.

The installation increased the uncanny feeling: a void saturated with invisible history, with memories of architecture both built and unbuilt. It gave rise to the desire to leave it as it was, the memorial as empty page right in the center of the reunified city, the center that was and always had been at the same time the very threshold between the eastern and western parts of the city, the space that now, in yet another layer of signification, seemed to be called upon to represent the invisible “wall in the head” that still separated East and West Germans and that was anticipated by the novelist Peter Schneider long before the actual wall came down.

Since then, the rebuilding of this empty center of Berlin has become a major focus of all discussions about the Berlin of tomorrow. With the new government quarter in the bend of the river Spree next to the Reichstag in the north and the corporate developments at Potsdamer and Leipziger Platz at the southern end of this space, Berlin will indeed gain a new center of corporate and governmental power.

But how important should the city center be for the cities of the future? After all, the city as center and the centered city are themselves in question today. Bernard Tschumi puts it well when he asks,
how can architecture whose historical role was to generate the appearance of stable images (monuments, order, etc.) deal with today’s culture of the disappearance of unstable images (twenty-four-image-per-second cinema, video, and computer-generated images)?

For some world wide web surfers and virtual city flaneurs, the built city itself has become obsolete. Others, however, like Saskia Sassen, the New York urbanist, or Dieter Hoffmann-Axthelm, a well-known Berlin architecture critic, have argued persuasively that it is precisely the growth of global telecommunications and the potential dispersal of population and resources that have created a new logic for concentration in what Sassen calls the global city. Indeed, the city as center is far from becoming obsolete. But as a center, the city is increasingly affected and structured by our culture of media images. In the move from the city as regional or national center of production to the city as international center of communications, media, and services, the very image of the city itself becomes central to its success in a globally competitive world. From New York’s new Times Square with its culture industry giants Disney and Bertelsmann and with its ecstasies of flashing commercial signage, to Berlin’s new Potsdamer Platz, with Sony, Mercedes, and Brown Boveri, visibility equals success.

Not surprisingly, then, the major concern with developing and rebuilding key sites in the heart of Berlin seems to be image rather than usage, attractiveness for tourists and official visitors rather than heterogeneous living space for Berlin’s inhabitants, erasure of memory rather than its imaginative preservation. The new architecture is to enhance the desired image of Berlin as capital and global metropolis of the twenty-first century, as a hub between Eastern and Western Europe, and as a center of corporate presence, however limited that presence may in the end turn out to be. But ironically, the concern with Berlin’s image, foremost on the minds of politicians who desire nothing so much as to increase Berlin’s ability to attract corporations and tourists, clashes with what I would describe as the fear of an architecture of images.

IV

This tension has produced a very sharp debate in which the battle lines are firmly entrenched between the defenders of a national tradition and the advocates of a contemporary high-tech global architecture. The traditionalists champion a local and national concept of urban culture that they call “critical reconstruction.” Its representatives, such as Hans Stimmann, the city’s director of building from 1991 to 1996, and Victor Lampugnani, former director of Frankfurt’s Museum of Architecture, call for a new simplicity that seems to aim at a mix of Karl Friedrich Schinkel’s classicism and Peter Behrens’s once daring modernism, with Heinrich Tessenow as a moderate modernist thrown in to secure an anti-avantgardist and anti-Weimar politics of traditionalism. Berlin must be Berlin, they say. Identity is at stake. But this desired identity is symptomatically dominated by pre-World War I architecture, the Mietskasernen, and the notion of the once again popular traditional neighborhood, affectionately called the Kiez. In the late 1970s, the Kiez emerged as counterculture in run-down, close-to-the-Wall quarters like Kreuzberg where squatters occupied and restored decaying housing stock. In the 1980s, it was embraced by the city’s mainstream preservation efforts. Now, it dictates key parameters of the new architectural conservatism. Forgotten are the architectural and planning experiments of the 1920s, the great Berlin estates of Martin Wagner and Bruno Taut. Forgotten or rather repressed is the architecture of the Nazi period, of which Berlin, after all, still harbors significant examples, from the Olympic Stadium to Göring’s aviation ministry near Leipziger Platz. Ignored and to be quickly forgotten is the architecture of the GDR, which many would just like to commit in its entirety to the wrecking ball—from the Stalinallee all the way to satellite housing projects like Marzahn or Hohenschönhausen. What we have instead is a strange mix of an originally leftist Kiez romanticism and a nineteenth-century vision of the neighborhood divided into small parcels, as if such structures could become prescriptive for the rebuilding of the city as a whole. But this is precisely what bureaucrats like Hans Stimmann and theorists like Dieter Hoffmann-Axthelm have in mind with critical reconstruction. Prescriptions such as city block building, traditional window facades, a uniform height of twenty-two meters (the ritually invoked Transflöhe), and building in stone are vociferously defended against all evidence that such traditionalism is wholly imaginary. Building in stone, indeed, at a time when the most stone you’d get is a thin stone veneer covering the concrete skeleton underneath.

There is not much of interest to say about the other, the corporate side, of the debate. Here we have international high tech, facade ecstasy,
preference for mostly banal high-rises, and floods of computer-generated imagery to convince us that we need to go with the future. But this dichotomy of Stone Age vs. cyber age is misleading: the fight is over image and image alone on both sides of the issue. The new nationally coded simplicity is just as image-driven as the image ecstasies of the high-tech camp, except that it posits banal images of a national past against equally banal images of a global future. The real Berlin of today, its conflicts and aspirations, remains a void in a debate that lacks imagination and vision.

Take Hans Stimmann and Victor Lampugnani. Lampugnani disapproves of “easy pictures . . . superficial sensation . . . tormented lightness . . . wild growth . . . nosy new interpretation.” Stimmann in turn protests that “Learning from Las Vegas” is out of place in a central European city, a programmatic statement as much directed against postmodernism in architecture as it is quite blatantly anti-American in the tradition of conservative German Kulturkritik. But this attack on a twenty-five-year-old founding text of postmodern architecture and its reputed image politics is strangely out of place and out of time. Las Vegas postmodernism has been defunct for some time, and nobody has ever suggested that Berlin should become casino city. The hidden object of Stimmann’s moralizing protest is Weimar Berlin. For Berlin in the 1920s, we must remember, defined its modernity as quintessentially “American”: Berlin as a “Chicago on the Spree,” and as such different from older European capitals and different also from the Berlin of the Wilhelmine Empire. The embrace of America was an embrace of pragmatic technological modernity, functionalism, mass culture, and democracy. America then offered images of the new, but memories of Weimar architecture—Erich Mendelsohn, Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus, Bruno Taut, Martin Wagner, Hannes Meyer, Mies van der Rohe—simply do not figure in the current debates about architecture in Berlin. In their antimodernism, the conservatives themselves have gone postmodern. Small wonder then that Stimmann’s preference for “critical reconstruction” is itself primarily concerned with image and advertising: the image of built space creating a sense of traditional identity for Berlin, whose voids must be filled, and the more intangible, yet economically decisive international image of the city in an age of global service economies, urban tourism, cultural competition, and new concentrations of wealth and power. But the desired image is decidedly pre-1914. The critical reconstructionists fantasize about a second Gründerzeit analogous to the founding years of the Second Reich after the Franco-Prussian War. Never mind that the gold rush of the first Gründerzeit quickly collapsed with the crash of 1873 and the beginning of a long-term depression.

The issue in central Berlin, to use Venturi/Scott Brown/Izenour’s by now classical postmodern terms from Learning from Las Vegas in this very different context, is about how best to decorate the corporate and governmental sheds to better attract international attention: not the city as multiply coded text to be filled with life by its dwellers and its readers, but the city as image and design in the service of displaying power and profit. This underlying goal has paradigmatically come to fruition in a project on Leipziger Platz called INFO BOX, a huge red box on black stilts with window fronts several stories high and with an open-air roof terrace for panoramic viewing.

This INFO BOX, attraction to some five thousand visitors per day, was built in 1995 as a temporary installation to serve as a viewing site onto the construction wasteland studded with building cranes that surrounds it. With its multimedia walls, sound rooms, and interactive computers, it
serves as an exhibition and advertising site for the corporate developments by Mercedes, Sony, and the A+T Investment Group on Leipziger and Potsdamer Platz. As cyber flaneur in “Virtual Berlin 2002,” you can enjoy a fly-through through a computer simulation of the new Potsdamer and Leipziger Platz developments or arrive by ICE at the future Lehrter Bahnhof. You can watch the construction site on a wraparound amphitheatrical screen inside, while listening to an animated Disneyfied Berlin sparrow deliver the proud narrative cast in a typically street-smart, slightly lower-class Berlin intonation. Or you can admire plaster casts of the major architects—the cult of the master builder is alive and well as simulacrum, all the more so as architects have become mere appendages in today’s world of urban development. More image box than info box, this space offers the ultimate paradigm of the many Schaustellen (viewing and spectacle sites), which the city mounted in the summer of 1996 at its major Baustellen (construction sites). Berlin as a whole advertised itself as Schaustelle with the slogan “Bühnen, Bauten, Boulevards” (stages, buildings, boulevards) and mounted a cultural program including over two hundred guided tours of construction sites, eight hundred hours of music, acrobatics, and pantomime on nine open-air stages throughout the summer. From void, then, to mise-en-scène and to image, images in the void: Berlin wird . . . Berlin becomes image.

Is it only perverse to compare the gaze from the INFO BOX’s terrace onto the construction wasteland of Potsdamer Platz to that other gaze we all remember, the gaze from the primitive elevated wooden (later metal) platform erected near the Wall west of Potsdamer Platz to allow Western visitors to take a long look eastward across the death strip as emblem of communist totalitarianism? It would be perverse only if one were simply to equate the two sites. And yet the memory of that other view- ing platform will not go away as it shares with the INFO BOX a certain obnoxious triumphalism: the political triumphalism of the Free World in the Cold War now having been replaced by the triumphalism of the free market in the age of corporate globalization.

Perhaps the box and the screen are our future. After all, the completed developments on Friedrichstraße, that major commercial artery crossing Unter den Linden, look frighteningly similar to their former computer simulations, with one major difference: what appeared airy, sometimes even elegant, and generously spacious in the simulations now looks oppressively monumental, massive, and forbidding, especially when experienced under the leaden Berlin skies in midwinter. Call it the revenge of the real. In addition, some of the new fancy malls on Friedrichstraße, meant to compete with the KaDeWe (Kaufhaus des Westens) and the shopping area on and near Kurfürstendamm, are not very successful, and Berlin already has surplus office space for rent as more is being built day by day. Thus my fear for the future of Potsdamer and Leipziger Platz: just as the INFO BOX immobiles the flaneur facing the screen, the tight corporate structures, despite their gesturing toward public spaces and piazzas, will encage and confine their visitors rather than create anything like the open, mobile, and multiply coded urban culture that once characterized this pivotal traffic hub between the eastern and western parts of the city. There is good reason to doubt whether Helmut Jahn’s happy plastic tent hovering above the central plaza of the Sony development will make up for the loss of urban life that these developments will inevitably entail.

V

Looking at the forces and pressures that currently shape the new Berlin, one may well fear that the ensemble of architectural solutions proposed may represent the worst start into the twenty-first century one could imagine for this city. Many of the major construction projects, it seems, have been designed against the city rather than for it. Some of them look like corporate spaceships reminiscent of the conclusion of Close Encounters of the Third Kind. The trouble is, they are here to stay. The void in the center of Berlin will have been filled. But memories of that haunting space from the months and years after the Wall came down will linger. The one architect who understood the nature of this empty space in the center of Berlin was Daniel Libeskind, who, in 1992, made the following proposal:

Rilke once said that everything is already there. We only must see it and protect it. We must develop a feel for places, streets, and houses which need our support. Take the open area at the Potsdamer Platz. I suggest a wilderness, one kilometer long, within which everything can stay as it is. The street simply ends in the bushes. Wonderful. After all, this area is the result of today’s divine natural law: nobody wanted it, nobody planned it, and yet it is firmly implanted in all our minds. And there in our minds, this image of the Potsdamer Platz void will remain for decades. Something like that cannot be easily erased, even if the whole area will be developed.12
Of course, what Libeskind describes tongue-in-cheek as "today’s divine natural law" is nothing but the pressure of history that created this void called Potsdamer Platz in the first place: the saturation bombings of 1944-45, which left little of the old Potsdamer Platz structures standing; the building of the Wall in 1961, which required a further clearing of the area; the tearing down of the wall in 1989, which made this whole area between the Brandenburg Gate and Potsdamer Platz into that prairie of history that Berliners quickly embraced. It was a void filled with history and memory, all of which will be erased (I'm less sanguine about the power of memory than Libeskind) by the new construction.

In light of Libeskind's own architectural project, however, which is crucially an architecture of memory, even his suggestion to leave the void as it was in the early 1990s was not just romantic and impractical. For Libeskind gave architectural form to another void that haunts Berlin, the historical void left by the Nazi destruction of Berlin's thriving Jewish life and culture. A discussion of Libeskind's museum project, arguably the single most interesting new building in Berlin, is appropriate here not only because it gives a different inflection to the notion of Berlin as void in relation to memory and to history, but because, however indirectly, it raises the issue of German national identity and the identity of Berlin. While all the other major building sites in Berlin today are inevitably haunted by the past, only Libeskind's building attempts to articulate memory and our relationship to it in its very spatial organization.

VI

In 1989, just a few months before the Wall cracked, Daniel Libeskind surprisingly won a competition to build the expansion of the Berlin Museum with the Jewish Museum, as it is awkwardly, and yet appropriately, called.

The Berlin Museum was founded in 1962 as a local history museum for the western part of the divided city, clearly a reaction to the building of the Wall, which had made the former local history museum, the Märkisches Museum, inaccessible. Since the mid-1970s, the Berlin Museum has had a Jewish section that documents the role of German Jewry in the history of Berlin. With the new expansion, the museum was to consist of three parts: general history of Berlin from 1870 to today, Jewish history in Berlin, and an in-between space dedicated to the theme of Jews in society, which would articulate the relations and crossovers between the other two components. Libeskind's proposal was as architecturally daring as it was conceptually persuasive, and even though multiple resistances—political, aesthetic, economic—had to be overcome, the museum has been built and celebrated its opening in September 2001.

The expansion sits next to the old Berlin Museum, a baroque palace that used to house the Berlin Chamber Court before it became a museum in 1962. The old and the new parts are apparently disconnected, and the only entrance to the expansion building is underground from the old building. Libeskind's structure has often been described as zigzag, as lightning, or, because it is to house a Jewish collection, as a fractured Star of David. He himself has called it "Between the Lines."

The ambiguity between an architecturally spatial and a literary meaning (one reads between the lines) is intended, and it suggests the conceptual core of the project. The basic structure of the building is found in the relation between two lines, one straight but broken into pieces, divided into fragments, the other multiply bent, contorted, but potentially going
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on ad infinitum. Architecturally this longitudinal axis translates into a thin slice of empty space that crosses the path of the zigzag structure at each intersection and that reaches from the bottom of the building to the top. It is sealed to the exhibition halls of the museum. It cannot be entered, but it is accessible to view from the small bridges that cross it at every level of the building: it is a view into an abyss extending downward and upward at the same time. Libeskind calls it the void.

This fractured and multiply interrupted void functions like a spine to the building. It is both conceptual and literal. And clearly, it signifies: as a void it signifies absence, the absence of Berlin’s Jews, most of whom perished in the Holocaust. As a fractured void it signifies history, a broken history without continuity: the history of Jews in Germany, of German Jews, and therefore also the history of Germany itself, which cannot be thought of as separate from Jewish history in Germany. Thus, in line with the original demand of the competition, the void provides that in-between space between Berlin’s history and Jewish history in Berlin, inseparable as they are, except that it does it in a form radically different from what was originally imagined by the competition. By leaving this in-between space void, the museum’s architecture forecloses the possibility of re-harmonizing German-Jewish history along the discredited models of symbiosis or assimilation. But it also forecloses the opposite view that sees the Holocaust as the inevitable telos of German history. Jewish life in Germany has been fundamentally altered by the Holocaust, but it has not stopped. The void thus becomes a space nurturing memory and reflection for Jews and for Germans. Its very presence points to an absence that can never be overcome, a rupture that cannot be healed, and that can certainly not be filled with museal stuff. Its fundamental epistemological negativity cannot be absorbed into the narratives that will be told by the objects and installations in the showrooms of the museum. The void will always be there in the minds of the spectators crossing the bridges that traverse it as they move through the exhibition space. The spectators themselves will move constantly between the lines. Organized around a void without images, Libeskind’s architecture has become script. His building itself writes the discontinuous narrative that is Berlin, inscribes it physically into the very movement of the museum visitor, and yet opens a space for remembrance to be articulated and read between the lines.

Of course, the voids I have been juxtaposing in this essay are of a fundamentally different nature. One is an open urban space resulting from war, destruction, and a series of subsequent historical events; the other is an architectural space, consciously constructed and self-reflexive to the core. Both spaces nurture memory, but whose memory? The very notion of the void will have different meaning for Jews than it will for Germans. There is a danger of romanticizing or naturalizing the voided center of Berlin, just as Libeskind’s building may ultimately not avoid the reproach of aestheticizing or monumentalizing the void architecturally. But then the very articulation of this museal space demonstrates the architect’s awareness of the dangers of monumentality: huge as the expansion is, the spectator can never see or experience it as a whole. Both the void inside and the building as perceived from the outside elude the totalizing gaze upon which monumental effects are predicated. Spatial monumentality is undercut in the inevitably temporal apprehension of the building. Such antimonumental monumentality, with which the museum memorializes both the Holocaust and Jewish life in Berlin, stands in sharp contrast to
the unself-conscious monumentality of the official government-sponsored Holocaust Monument, which is to be built at the northern end of that highly charged space between the Brandenburg Gate and Leipziger Platz. For those who for good reasons question the ability of traditional monuments to keep memory alive as public or collective memory, Libeskind's expansion of the Berlin Museum may be a better memorial to German and Jewish history, the history of the living and of the dead, than any official funereal Holocaust monument could possibly be.

As architecture, then, Libeskind's museum is the only project in the current Berlin building boom that explicitly articulates issues of national and local history in ways pertinent to post-unification Germany. In its spatial emphasis on the radical ruptures, discontinuities, and fractures of German and German-Jewish history, it stands in opposition to the critical reconstructionists' attempts to create a seamless continuity with a pre-1914 national past that would erase memories of Weimar, Nazi, and GDR architecture in the process. As an architecture of memory, it also opposes the postnationalism of global corporate architecture à la Potsdamer and Leipziger Platz, an architecture of development that has neither memory nor sense of place to begin with. As an unintentional manifesto, the museum points to the conceptual emptiness that currently exists between a nostalgic pre-1914 understanding of the city and its post-2002 entropic corporate mall. The history of Berlin as a void is not over yet, but then perhaps a city as vast and vibrant as Berlin will manage to incorporate its latest white elephants at Potsdamer and Leipziger Platz into the larger urban fabric. If Paris is able to live with Sacre Coeur, who is to say that Berlin cannot stomach Sony Corp.? Once the current image frenzy is over, the Info Box dismantled, and the critical reconstructionists forgotten, the notion of the capital as a montage of many historical forms and spaces will reassert itself, and the commitment to the necessarily palimpsestic texture of urban space may even lead to new, not yet imaginable forms of architecture.

CHAPTER 3. THE VOIDS OF BERLIN


3. Ernst Bloch, Erbschaft dieser Zeit (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), 212–28. Of course, Bloch’s phrasing “Funktionen im Hohlräume” (literally, functions in a hollow space) suggests a bounded void that after all is appropriate whenever one discusses a void in a spatial or temporal sense.


9. Some of the key contributions to the debate about critical reconstruction are collected in Einfach schwierig: Eine deutsche Architekturdebatte, ed. Gert Kähler (Braunschweig: Vieweg, 1995).


13. For a gentle, though to me ultimately unpersuasive, critique of Libeskind’s void as being too determined by history, meaning, and experience, see Jacques Derrida, “Jacques Derrida zu ‘Between the Lines’,” in Libeskind, Radix—Matrix, 135–17.

14. This is implied by Derrida, for whom a void that represents is no longer a proper void.

15. A competition in 1995 with a total of 527 entries ended in a public outcry over the winning entry, a slanted concrete slab the size of two football fields with millions of victim names carved in stone. Even Helmut Kohl did not like it, though surely for the wrong reasons. The debate continued until Peter Eisenman’s proposal was accepted several years later, but at the time of this writing this monument to the murdered Jews of Europe has not yet been erected.

16. I am only talking here about the building as architecture. Its museal and curatorial functions are still too much in flux for us to comment with any degree of certainty about the ways in which the exhibition spaces will be used or even who will have ultimate curatorial control over the expansion space.

CHAPTER 5. FEAR OF MICE

1. On Disney in Germany, see J. P. Storm and M. Dressler, Im Reiche der Mickey Mouse: Walt Disney in Deutschland 1927–1945 (Berlin: Henschel, 1991).


5. Cf. the essays in this book “The Voids of Berlin” and the later “After the War,” which discuss the Potsdamer Platz development at different stages in the mid- and late 1990s.


7. At the time of this writing (1997), one office tower at the northeast corner of Broadway and Forty-second Street is already being built and a second one has been approved. Two more are under consideration.


CHAPTER 6. MEMORY SITES IN AN EXPANDED FIELD


3. Marguerite Feitlowitz, A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Tor