Forget Berlin

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The summer of 1999 saw the opening of “The Story of Berlin: Die Erlebnisausstellung der Hauptstadt,” a permanent exhibit spread out over four floors and more than 60,000 square feet in the heart of Berlin Wilmersdorf. “The Story of Berlin” is designed for window shoppers who, after strolling along the glamorous store fronts of Kurfürstendamm, no longer hesitate to embrace historical memory itself as a fantastic commodity. Similar to the display windows you have to pass when approaching the exhibit, the show’s twenty halls deliver Berlin history to the visitor’s consuming glance. And yet, in its efforts to make history experiential, “The Story of Berlin” also explodes the framed stillness of Kurfürstendamm’s shop windows. Aided by a panoply of interactive computer screens, 3D soundscapes, digitized imagery, and historical replicas, “The Story of Berlin” transforms historical memory into live action, as if no frame of perception and historical mediation existed. Advanced technologies invite the viewer to experience the city’s 800 year history—according to one of the many advertising slogans—“[m]it allen Sinnen […] als wären Sie dabei gewesen” (http://www.story-of-berlin.de). Rather than simply look at or read about urban history, the viewer is asked to touch and enter it. High-tech digitization grants experiences of sensual immersion and affective immediacy, no matter whether the exhibit’s individual sectors recall the foundation of Berlin during the Middle Ages, the turmoil of the Weimar era, or the burning of books during the Third Reich. Time here turns into space. In all its different sections, “The Story of Berlin” re-members the city’s history as a living space animated by heritage values and properties. It reifies the textures of history into the new capital’s primary selling point, and it thereby converts even Berlin’s many painful memories into viable tourist attractions.

In City of Bits (1994), William J. Mitchell writes that the digital city of the future:

will be a city unrooted to any definite spot on the surface of the earth, shaped by connectivity and bandwidth constraints rather than accessibility and land values, largely asynchronous in its operation, and inhabited by disembodied and fragmented subjects who exist as collections of aliases and agents. Its places will be constructed virtually by software instead of physically from stones and timbers, and they will be connected by logical linkages rather than by doors, passageways, and streets. (24)

According to Mitchell, the rise of digital telecommunications, computer networks, and technologies of virtualization does not simply add a new chapter to the history of architecture and urban experience, it changes the whole way we must think about the city’s configuration of space and time, past and present. “The Story of Berlin,” one might conclude, exemplifies this new understanding of architectural sites and urban memory as e-topian. The exhibit’s Berlin is one whose infrastructures are effects of computational devices. It is a city in which urban history has become coextensive with hard disk space; in which the act of remembering metonymizes the transfer
of bytes to Random Access Memory. To recall the city’s past here means to explore the wonders of digital information storage, processing, and transmission. What reawakens the city’s history is not the unpredictable work of individual recollection, but rather the links offered by user-friendly software programs and self-effacing interfaces. It may therefore come as no surprise that in their efforts to advertise the show, the makers of “The Story of Berlin” praise the exhibit’s contents as much as the machinery that makes it possible. The show, they suggest, delivers the city’s past as a site of fascinating attractions; it conjures powerful illusions of the real so as to transport viewers effectively through discontinuous spaces and times. As importantly, however, the exhibit—according to its creators—is designed to astonish the visitor about its own technologies of presentation. Rather than merely absorbing the viewer into overwhelming simulations of the past, the show displays its own act of showmaking and thereby acknowledges the viewer’s active presence. The true star of “The Story of Berlin,” according to this second marketing strategy, is not the new German capital and its past, but above all the digital equipment that unlocks the city’s history for the sensual experience of potential visitors.

In the perspective of many contemporary media theorists, the show’s ambivalent self-positioning between attraction and astonishment would prove nothing other than a curious instance of self-referentiality. “The Story of Berlin,” according to this view, is not about Berlin history. It is about itself: the medium—digitized history, prosthetic memory, computational devices—turns out to be the principle message. What this neo-McLuhanian reading flattens out, however, is the show’s political and historical index. For “The Story of Berlin” energizes and is energized by contemporary discourses about history and memory, the local and the national, place and narrative, discourses that are intimately tied to the rise of the self-proclaimed Berlin Republic. Dedicated to showcasing the highlights of urban history, the exhibit reveals a thinking about the past and about the symbolic power of spatial forms virtually impossible within the discursive economy of the Bonn Republic. The architects of postwar Bonn, we should recall, wanted to break with the symbolism of earlier times. They designed Bonn as a modest and deliberately non-attractive city where—to speak cinematically—neither dramatic pans nor awe-inspiring long shots could cast a spell over the visitor’s sense perception. In a concerted effort not to provide plastic expressions of power, collective identity, or national grandeur, they favored function over form, minimalist design over breathtaking gesture. “The Story of Berlin” entertains fantasies about the sensual and the political, about history and its legacies that clearly depart from Bonn’s humility. Unlike Bonn’s architects, the exhibit maps urban spaces and architectural configurations as highly representative of the nation’s narrative. As it provides awesome attractions and powerful astonishments, “The Story of Berlin” capitalizes on the postwall refashioning of Berlin as a global city and historically self-confident capital. Far from simply being about itself, the exhibit reawakens the splendors of the past so as to renegotiate the politics of architectural forms and spatial experiences in the present.

“The Story of Berlin” is part of a much larger culture of architectural memory that has preoccupied Germany since unification. Whereas during the Bonn years many fundamental debates about questions of national identity and historical recollection were played out in the field of literary expressions, in the new Berlin Republic public architecture has assumed a highly significant role in recalling the past and marking the nation’s place after the end of the Cold War. Whether we consider the debates over Peter Eisenman’s Holocaust memorial, Sir Norman Foster’s renovated...
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Reichstag, Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum, or the reconstruction of the Berlin Stadtschloss—all indicate this prominent function of architectural forms today to evoke historical legacies and negotiate the challenges of an ever-more global future. It is therefore by no means surprising that in recent years American German Studies, in its effort to examine the construction and contestation of individual and collective identities, has turned its attention increasingly to the nexus of space, memory, and identity in contemporary Germany. In particular the remaking of Berlin into a capital city of both collective memory and transnational appeal seems to be on everyone’s mind. It is the task of the following pages to probe some of the methodological, epistemological, normative, and political assumptions that drive our current attempts to understand sites of urban memory in postwall Germany, to write narratives that escape the self-congratulatory fetishism of “The Story of Berlin.” How, I shall ask, can we read and interpret architectural forms and spatial practices in the first place? To what extent does our renewed interest in urban memory become complicit with the postwall reconstruction of locality and historicity as global tourist attractions? How can we confront the corporate reinscription of history today without falling back into some kind of primitivist jargon of authenticity? What are the costs of German Studies’ recent focus on the new capital and the “ghosts of Berlin” (Ladd)? And, finally, how can we speak about the anamnestic function of public architecture without leveling necessary differences between discourses of history and memory?

While there is clearly no way to answer all these questions in a single essay, the following remarks seek at least to draw attention to sets of issues German Studies ought to face when investigating architectures of memory in contemporary Germany. What at times may sound polemical, however, is by no means meant to discredit German Studies’ efforts to speak about matters beyond the conventional focus on literary material. On the contrary, the primary aim of the following five points is to peruse exactly what Germanists are doing and what they can accomplish when writing their own stories of Berlin. In doing so, I hope to provide some good arguments against any misguided resurrection of the old within the new, i.e., an unmediated application of literary criticism to architectural forms. If German Studies wants to speak competently about the ties between architecture, urban space, memory, and nation in postwall Germany, it not only must familiarize itself with the conceptual vocabularies of contemporary urban theory and cultural geography, it must also resist any temptation to read built space in analogy to literary texts and poetic expressions.

I

Fredric Jameson has suggested that the symbolic meaning of works of art and architecture is as volatile as the much-discussed arbitrariness of the sign. As in our dreams, Jameson writes,

the spatial unconscious can associate anything with anything else—a dead body meaning jubilatory euphoria, a loved one’s photograph triggering violent xenophobia. (259)

No matter how directly it presents itself as such, no product of cultural production can be seen as having certain political values once and for all. It was therefore one of the principle errors of the avant-gardes and neo-avantgardes of the twentieth century to view cultural forms as inherently political, for there can never be any guarantee that artworks or, even more so, architectural configurations will be used in the way demanded or expected. For Jameson, the political content and meaning of built space does not reside in its mere form. In-
stead, meaning is projected onto space in a process of allegorization, a process depending on contingent contexts as much as unconscious associations. Space per se can never be political. Although a given place may be seen at a particular moment as a concrete embodiment of political meanings, any political understanding and appropriation is strictly allegorical and hence subject to change: “you have to know that this is what it is supposed to be or mean—in itself it is inert” (259).

Jameson’s understanding of space as allegorical is useful when thinking about the mnemonic politics of architectural configurations and urban designs as well. Neither public history nor individual memory reside in a certain structure’s form itself. Rather, they must be seen as products of projection on the part of historically situated users. No building, in spite of all its strategies of ostentatious self-labeling, can own a certain historical meaning once and for all, like an inalienable property. Under certain circumstances this building might be recognized as a plastic embodiment of a certain past, but we cannot deduce its memorial functions a priori from certain formal arrangements. Though the sheer materiality of built space might shape the user’s sense perception, the historical meaning and mnemonic value of any given structure is, in other words, a question of allegorical content. In itself, built space signifies nothing. Its historical meanings depend on narratives and discourses negotiating what a certain building is meant to mean, on projective activities that are by no means immune to the historical process.

Jameson’s insistence on the allegorical meaning of architecture urges us to understand the identity of a certain place as a reflex, not of inherent qualities and formal features, but of social interrelations that stretch far beyond the actual place in question. To emphasize the allegorical content of architectural memory implies, in Doreen Massey’s words, to question any characterization of place which is singular, essentialist, and which relies on a view of there having been one past of this place, one story to tell, most particularly where that story is an internalized one of the evolution of that place within its bounds. (114)

Places are articulations. Their identities exceed the work of abstract and unified interpretations. Their meanings are constituted at the intersection of multiple memories, desires, narratives, inscriptions, and physical uses. Particular buildings might index the past or open a space for personal memory by incorporating or modifying certain stylistic idioms, formal languages, or symbolic references. But in order to understand their relation to history and memory we need to do much more than simply decode their formal organization of space, that is to say, read them like texts or artistic expressions. It is one of the ironies of Daniel Libeskind’s much-discussed Jewish Museum that this building, whatever its many merits and bold interventions, cultivates precisely such reductive approaches to built space. Designed as a multi-layered text whose intended meanings and symbolic references ask to be decoded, Libeskind’s building not only wants to position the user as a hermeneutic reader, but suggests that meaning and memory inheres to the language of architectural forms itself. A no doubt fascinating allegory of history and memory, the building thus obscures nothing other than the allegorical and negotiated status of architectural memory. Writerly structures such as Libeskind’s Jewish Museum are literary critics’ fantasies. While there is no reason not to follow their invitation and read between their lines, we must not think that the architect’s self-labeling—however disjunctive or multiple it may be—is the only story that should be told about the memorial function of certain places.

When investigating architectural allegories of memory and identity today, Ger-
man Studies cannot avoid examining how certain building codes, zoning policies, political controversies, investment interests, and popular debates set the stage for the empirical construction and mnemonic use of specific buildings in their local, national, or even transnational context. No analysis of architectural memory is complete without paying heed, in equal measures, to (1) the codified and institutionalized ways of producing space that order social relations from above, (2) the peculiar patterns by which people perceive and appropriate certain places within their everyday life, and (3) the shifting and by no means unified registers of symbols, experiences, and unconscious associations that people draw on in order to understand existing spaces as representational. Pace Libeskind, neither strategies of symbolic exegesis nor of close reading can ever suffice in order to recognize how specific buildings can help articulate the location of the past in the present. I am certainly not arguing here that historical symbolizations and significations do not matter. It would be foolish to dismiss Berlin’s search for representing the past qua architecture per se as hopeless or ideological. At the same time, however, we should not forget that memory does not reside in certain buildings themselves, but in how given groups of people at given moments in time perceive and make use of them.

II

Berlin architecture and urban design since unification has been obsessed with endowing the new capital with an “emotionally appealing addition of state representation” (Ganger 16). Whether we consider the renovation of the old Reichstag building or the construction of the new Chancellery, postwall Berlin has become a site at which democratic politics and impressive architecture are supposed to go hand in hand again. As importantly, however, the frenzied remaking of the city since 1990 has served the purpose of improving the city’s location in the transnational reorganization of capital, of enhancing Berlin’s attraction and marketability on a worldwide scale. An economic outpost and cultural enclave throughout the era of the Cold War, postunification Berlin has been charged to become a global city: a self-assured metropolis coordinating the evermore global flow of moneys, technologies, labor forces, images, sounds, pleasures, and meanings. Yet rather than create a city whose surface simply mimics the layout of other first-tier cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Paris, London, or Tokyo, Berlin city planners today explore images of locality and historicity in order to increase the city’s competitive advantages. In stark contrast to the self-restrained architects of postwar Bonn, Berlin’s chief designers have chosen to provide highly choreographed environments enhancing local prestige and gratifying desires for historical continuity, livability and territorialization. They have fragmented urban space into a series of carefully developed, albeit isolated, zones of comfort and historical reference that undercut any attempt at seeing the city as an integrated space. Capitalizing on history as a global mark of differentiation and distinction, Berlin’s new city planners have reified “urbanity” into an object of consumption, thereby obscuring the vagaries of modern urban experience, the fact that the very notion of the urban has been in flux at least since the last turn of the century. Berlin today embodies “a grid of well-designed and self-enclosed places in which the interstitial spaces are abandoned or neglected” (Boyer, “The Great Frame-Up” 81). To walk through this city means to assume the role of a moving channel flipper, to traverse disconnected segments that position the individual in different imaginary pasts, presents, and futures. If Weimar Berlin invited the modern city dweller to become “a camera with its shutter open,
quite passive, recording, not thinking” (Isherwood 1), the globalized cityscape of postunification Berlin wants to be read and consumed like a web-based hypertext. Global cities have something for everyone. They offer diverse pleasures, meanings, and memories within a territory of self-contained archives and event zones. Click on any link and your browser will take you to the next page, a page that bears no temporal or spatial connection to the previous one.

Given this ever-increasing fragmentation and commodification of urban space under the condition of globalization, German Studies should not avoid asking a number of uncomfortable questions about the architectural reinscription of history and memory in contemporary Berlin and elsewhere. To what extent does the construction of historical monuments and public memorials play into the hands of “glocal” zoning policies? At what point do they become complicit with the marketing of urban history as a sign of distinction, consumption, and livability? Isn’t today’s desire for memorial architecture an effect of rather than an antidote to the way in which global capital and high-tech information threaten “to make categories like past and future, experience and expectation, memory and anticipation themselves obsolete” (Huyssen 9)? Exactly when does memory become ideology? And what kind of structures and contextualizations does it take in order to recall memories that may transcend the compartmentalization of experience within the disconnected zones of urban space today?

Intellectual discourse in Germany since the late 1960s rested largely on the assumption that public knowledge about the Nazi past would prevent any recurrence of German nationalism, racism, and antisemitism. Memory was seen as a practical expression of moral enlightenment and progress, as a direct conduit of political and social reform. Partly a result of this politics of memory, Germans today can clearly no longer be faulted for having forgotten the Nazi era and for sticking to the proverbial amnesia of the postwar decades. It would be imprudent to assume, however, that recent surfeits of urban memory in Germany would still follow the path envisioned by public intellectuals throughout the past thirty years. When investigating the memorial zones and well-designed grids of contemporary urban space, German Studies can no longer hold on to the concepts of the 1960s: they have been consumed by the historical process itself. Memory per se is neither good nor bad, progressive nor reactionary, enlightening nor preservationist. In order to assess memory’s role in contemporary urban space German Studies will therefore have to develop an ethos of distinction that is able to evaluate how memory connects different times and spaces, individual and collective experiences. Unless it wants to abandon any critical perspective, German Studies cannot simply examine urban sites of memory in their own terms and within their own bounds. Instead, we must find means to appraise the extent to which monuments and memorials can exceed the reifying logic of localization, surpass the fragmentation of urban space, and thus reinsert the kind of interstitial places zoning policies and city designs today seem to neglect or mask. It is uncertain whether any such analysis of urban memory can succeed without taking recourse to what affords little popularity within contemporary theoretical discourse: the concept of the city as a totality, however fragmented, imbricated, multiple, and centrifugal its space may be.

III

Current arguments about Berlin renewal, whether they focus on the pending reconstruction of the Stadtschloss or the completed renovation of the Hack’sche Höfe, often invoke the trope of Disneyfication in or-
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order to question the packaging of history and memory into tourist attractions. To speak of urban design as a historical (or better: historicist) theme park, in this perspective, means firstly to argue against any attempt at transforming urban space into a theatrical space of positive identifications. Disneyfication glosses over the cracks of painful pasts in order to showcase a history that never existed as such. Secondly, to speak of Disneyfication often implies the assumption that current urban projects level necessary differences, not only between past and present, the local and the global, but also between the edifying appreciation and the dim-witted consumption of history. Disney-like architecture wants to trigger high-cultural effects by means of a mass-cultural apparatus; it falsely endows the popular with the cultural capital of aesthetic refinement. Third and finally, the Disney trope serves the purposes of labeling certain projects as inauthentic, as spellbinding simulations and simulacra. Accordingly, the hyperreal textures of Disney-like architecture transform the work of memory into a thrilling ride through space and time. They coerce us to experience the past directly with our bodies, as if we had really been there, and thereby overwhelm our senses and silence our minds.

While postmodern and corporate historicism today indeed often results in the radical expansion of what Marc Augé calls non-places, i.e., spaces that seem to position us both everywhere and nowhere, there are good reasons to be wary about the critical efficacy of the Disney trope. In its efforts to investigate urban forms of historical recollection, German Studies would do well to clarify its normative assumptions whenever branding certain urban projects as inauthentic theme parks of history. To critique urban reconstruction as a form of Disneyfication might be politically opportune. In many cases, however, the trope obscures more than it produces insight. In light of the above-mentioned arguments, I see three sets of open questions we should answer before we might want to launch the Disney metaphor in our critique of certain sites of urban memory.

1. Today's city planning may often transform present urban space into a stage reenacting the past, but—so we must ask first—how much do these new theaters of memory really differ from the way in which theatrical designs, thespian tropes, and hybrid citations have informed public architecture ever since the Renaissance? To what extent does the hype about the reconstruction of the Berlin Stadtschloss conceptually differ from, say, the nineteenth-century craze about the completion of the Kölner Dom as a site restaging an imaginary past for a highly transitory present (Koshar 54–55, 95–96, 154–55)? Or from Karl Friedrich Schinkel's scenographic approach to urban design when turning the heart of Berlin in the second half of the 1810s into "a series of pleasing vistas and perspectives, varying in scale and orientation" (Boyer, Collective Memory 99)?

2. Though it would be cynical to deny the business practices of global capital that structure today's commodification of architectural styles, images, and technologies, we should question the extent to which the Disney trope might gloss over the fact that one and the same object can mean very different things to different people and publics. Does the concept of Disneyfication not on the one hand completely belittle the curious and often excessive promises of mass consumption, while on the other ignoring the productivity of individual appropriation, that is to say, the way in which vernacular uses of architectural sites might produce highly diverse, differentiated, and local memories and meanings?

3. While it is relatively obvious that contemporary architecture often results in an aestheticization of urban forms, i.e., a radical separation between spatial practice and the representation of space, we must ask to what extent the theme park trope—his-
tory and memory as a spectacular ride—
can adequately describe the affective-sen-
sory effects of urban designs today. Does
not the excessive emphasis on visual dis-
play and spatial choreography in contem-
porary architecture, instead of intoxicat-
ing the viewer’s senses, activate a com-
ensatory protection against overstimula-
tion? Does the hyperreality of today’s
urban designs, rather than entertaining
the viewer with a seductive aesthetics of
historical memory, not threaten to become
anaesthetic (Leach)—an aesthetics that
numbs the senses and denies the body as
private site of experience?

Musing about the desire for historical
reconstruction in postwall Berlin, Daniel
Libeskind has advised that, “You can’t re-
start history by pressing a button. It be-
comes a kitsch idea of history” (Riding 38).

It is the trope of Disneyfication that in much
of contemporary critical discourse serves the
purpose of identifying such scenarios of ar-
chitectural kitsch. While it is not my inten-
tion at all to challenge Libeskind’s stress
on historical mediation (au contraire!), my
point here is simply to say that we must
carefully reflect about our normative and
methodological presuppositions before we
condemn certain architectural memories
as inauthentic, theatrical, aestheticized, or
simulated. Any assertive jargon of authen-
ticity is simply not sufficient for challeng-
ing the ways in which architectural pro-
jects might push the buttons of history and
thereby reduce, rather than enrich, the
space of lived experience.

IV

In the immediate aftermath of unifi-
cation, many German intellectuals were
quick to discard the unassuming self-rep-
resentation of the Bonn Republic as a sign
of “political and intellectual regionalism”
(Bohrer 69). Whereas the modernist icono-
clasm of Bonn architecture was now re-
jected as the mark of political atomization
and aesthetic provincialism, the capital’s
move to Berlin promised the return of a
self-confident national imaginary which
could simultaneously heal the wounds of
the Cold War and symbolize Germany’s
altered position in Europe and the New
World Order. Like Britain or France, which
had always relied on much older architec-
tural forms in order to represent demo-
cratic politics, postwall Germany too, ac-
cording to many postwall voices, should es-
pouse Berlin’s architectural heritage for
the purpose of celebrating political sover-
eignty, manifesting national unity, and
symbolizing democratic openness. Subse-
sequently, many considered Sir Norman Fos-
ter’s renovation of the old Reichstag build-
ing as emblematic for this renegotiation of
the national and the historical. In the ab-
sence of any monument memorializing the
process of unification itself, the finished
new Reichstag today seems to embody ev-
erything that makes the Berlin Republic
different from its Bonn precursor. In par-
ticular its glass-and-steel dome has come to
serve as the Berlin Republic’s new signa-
ture piece: a site of powerful identification
and irresistible astonishment. Designed as
an allegory for political transparency as
much as a marketable tourist attraction,
Foster’s dome invites the nation’s subjects
literally to look up to their capital again.
Self-consciously cosmopolitan, it recodes
the auratic and the monumental in the
hopes of freeing the present from the spell
of the past.4

There are clearly many good reasons
why German Studies should spend consid-
erable energy addressing how Berlin archi-
tectural projects such as the Reichstag re-
work the legacies of the past so as to envi-
sion a different future. In many respects,
Berlin urban space (as recent disputes
about the erection of a Holocaust memorial
as much as the future of the Palast der
Republik have evidenced) functions as a
paradigmatic setting for the politics of
memory in postwall German. In our efforts to investigate the negotiation of individual memory, collective history, and national identity in postwall Germany, we therefore cannot do without an exploration of how urban designers, local politicians, investment strategists, and tourist operators redefine Berlin as a national allegory and representative imaginary. However, German Studies will be ill served if it ignores what, according to the Berlin Republic’s new ideological lingo, is now suddenly denounced as the provinces. Let us not forget about the profoundly federalist and creatively decentered traditions of German urban culture. Berlin is not and will never be a second Paris. Rather than troping all our paths to the new capital, let us also continue to explore the local textures and regional memories of other German areas. Similar to the way recent (2000) feature films such as Tom Tykwer’s Der Krieger und die Kaiserin, Vanessa Jopp’s Vergiss’ Amerika, and Detlev Buck’s Liebesluder have mapped the local as a site of competing memories and historical inscriptions, so German Studies should keep an eye on the regional diversity of German architectures of memory. Let us resist the lures of metropolitan grandeur and not forget about going to Wuppertal, Aschleben, or Meschede!

V

In the first decades of the twentieth century, architectural modernism was often driven by the belief that bold modifications of built space would automatically result in social and political reform. Breaking with the codes and conventions of the past, modernism hoped to prepare the present for a better future. It rejected historicist figurations and ornamental designs with the ambition to redefine the architect as a social engineer. Though abundant with historical reference and architectural pastiche, postwall Berlin seems to owe its sweeping reconstruction to the power of similar premises. Contemporary Germans, Jane Kramer has noted hyperbolically:

live in a capital from which the worst of Germany’s history was decreed, and now that the government is moving back to that capital they have convinced themselves that the right buildings will somehow produce the right attitudes in the people inside them. They like the transparency of the Reichstag dome—it’s the most visited place in the city now—because they think it will somehow guarantee that openness and democracy thrive in the Reichstag. They think that the right number of stone slabs in a Holocaust monument will possess a memory of mass death; that the right balance of concrete and glass in a building for their Chancellor will temper authority with accountability. (Kramer 54)

Reminiscent of modernism’s hubris, post-unification urban planning has been obsessed with the idea of improving society by means of reorganizing public space. Architectural designs, according to this belief, have the power to articulate or cure the many painful memories of national history. They provide meanings that redefine the past’s place in the present and in doing so bring Germany back to the future.

As exaggerated as they may seem, Kramer’s observations are of interest here for at least two methodologically instructive reasons. First, by ridiculing any facile equation of architectural form and political meaning, Kramer reformulates Jameson’s stress on the allegorical character of architecture. Like Jameson, Kramer suggests that it is not the realm of form alone that may decide on how built space can stimulate people to recall certain pasts and evaluate the place of history in the present. In addition to Jameson’s argument, however, Kramer also submits that non-allegorical readings of architectural structures—the perception of architecture as a sym-
bolic language—might block rather than enable productive forms of memory. Accordingly, instead of reading architectural designs like authentic works of art, we should focus on how different people inhabit certain structures. In fact, it might be the high-cultural emphasis on the aesthetic, on an architect’s intended meanings and references, that presents the mother of all problems concerning postunification urban projects and architectural memories. Far from actualizing the past in the present, the hermeneutic overdrive of postwall architectural discourse—the frenzied search for symbolic meaning and fixed interpretation—secretly suggests that monuments can do the work of memorization for us and it thus, in the final analysis, causes memory to recede.

Second, by mocking the desire to see traumatic histories commemorated in the design of architectural structures themselves, Kramer urges us not to blur categorical distinctions between public history and collective memory, i.e., between the interest in the representation of the historicity of past events on the one hand, and on the other the focus on making the past present as a source of negotiating identities and differences. Rather than to think of history and memory as binary opposites, however, we ought to conceptualize both in terms of a dialectical or supplementary relationship, one improving the work of the other without aiming at closure or totalization. As Dominick LaCapra has written:

Memory is both more and less than history, and vice-versa. History may never capture certain elements of memory: the feel of an experience, the intensity of joy or suffering, the quality of an occurrence. Yet history also includes elements that are not exhausted by memory, such as demographic, ecological, and economical factors. More important, perhaps, it tests memory and ideally leads to the emergence of both a more accurate memory and a clearer appraisal of what is or is not factual in remembrance. (LaCapra 20)”

History can probe the quasi-mythic labor of memory; it can draw our attention to how the work of representation might complicate what is usually assumed to be the genuine muse of subjective remembrance. Memory, by way of contrast, may infuse history with a critical sense of what, in our encounter with the past, is of greater and what of lesser importance; it brings into focus what kinds of historical traditions might be preserved and what should be avoided in the future.

In its study of current architectures (and industries) of memory, German Studies will do well to recognize this dialectical or supplementary character of history and memory, for it is only then that we can understand the full extent of what Kramer discusses as the architectural fetishism of the present. To think—in Kramer’s terms—that architectural structures themselves can index historical events and embody memory indicates nothing other than—in LaCapra’s terms—an ideological conflation of remembrance and history, of private and public narratives. Rather than endorse all sites of commemoration today as sites opposing the distantiating gaze of history, German Studies should develop conceptual means to distinguish between and evaluate different strategies of negotiating history and memory. Remaking past realities into objects of tangible sensation, monuments and architectural structures might be of great importance to help people commemorate painful pasts and/or articulate present-day identifications and dissociations. As importantly, however, whenever it entertains the individual with the belief in unmediated access to the lived experiences of the past, architectural memory may also paper over, rather than commemorate or work out, lasting historical traumas, deep-seated repressions, and irretrievable losses.
VI

The idea of modern urbanism in the pre-war and early postwar period was often directly tied to the idea of political emancipation. Suspending the legacy of oppressive traditions, modern urbanity was often seen as a precondition for individual empowerment and collective liberation, as a universalist way of life that created its norms, values, orientations, solidarities, and interpretations out of itself. Reevaluating its relation to the past, contemporary urbanism has replaced this notion of the city as emancipation with a view of the metropolis as a site of difference and multiplicity. In the post-Fordist city of the global age, abundant reinscriptions of history and memory serve the purpose of defining local nodes of meaning, identification, pleasure, and consumption. Rather than setting us free from history, the postmodern city provides a matrix in which different presents and pasts coexist next to each other, a highly segregated and often extremely hierarchal space where dissimilar memories, social practices, and representational strategies all seem to reside in self-contained proximity.

In its thinking about urban and architectural sites of memory, German Studies, I suggest, should try to bring the best moments of both these traditions into a productive conversation. Instead of simply repeating the orchestrated simulation of collective memories in contemporary media cultures, we should stress the role of incommensurable recollections as they emerge from the cracks and fissures of hegemonic spatial representations. Instead of reading urban space as a neatly integrated totality, we should trace memories and countermemories that crisscross dominant territorializations of culture and history and thereby articulate difference, temporariness, and nonidentity. As importantly, however, in our analysis of different and other spaces, we should be careful not to fall into the traps of neo-liberalism and hence fetishize the (market-driven) diversification of memory in contemporary urban culture per se as something good and desirable. The memory boom of the last decade might indeed express a “basic human need to live in extended structures of temporality” (Huyssen, 9), one which challenges the many ways in which new technologies of communication and information today erase conventional notions of past and future. Yet in our efforts to map how architecture can make diverse pasts present, let us not simply celebrate differential memories as being automatically subversive. While many may no longer believe in the universalist rhetoric of architectural modernism, we should at least inquire into the extent to which urban sites of memory today either recognize the alterity or difference of the past as a source of articulating the necessity of historical transformations, self-critique, and political reform, or simply reinscribe history in order to reify difference and turn urban space into a stage for self-sufficient spectacles.

Notes

1 See Mitchell’s follow-up study, e-topia: “Urban Life, Jim—but Not as We Know It.” See also Boyer and Pawley.
2 See, for instance, the various contributions to Scharenberg; and Krätke and Borst.
4 For a detailed analysis and critique of Foster’s project, see Koepnick.
5 For a similar discussion of the differences—and interactions—between history and memory, see Halbwachs; and Novick 1–15.

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