

Redefining Place in the Urban Landscape of Contemporary Berlin:

*The Topography of Terror and the Memorial Site Berlin-Hohenschönhausen:*

From Places of Terror to Places of Remembrance, Education, and Mourning

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*Abstract:*

*Places in the urban landscape constantly undertake a shift of meaning. Redefined as memorial sites, places often enable recollections and embodiments of the past. Shaped and designed according to political and public discourses, memorial sites become significant textures in an urban environment and fulfill multilayered tasks in modern urban landscapes.*

*In my paper I will discuss how two memorial sites in Berlin's cityscape materially symbolize a new form of memory-work: the former SS-Headquarters Building, now known as the Topography of Terror, and the former State Security prison in Berlin-Hohenschönhausen. These two juxtaposed examples generate a set of questions addressing the differences of redefining place in contemporary Berlin, the differences of coming to terms with the past, and the extent of the all-important educational impact on their beholders. Of special interest is thereby how these two memorial sites are conceptualized and if their design and overall origination provide the chance for an individual and self-reliant engagement with the past, the present, and the future.*

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When Mark Crinson discussed the characteristic forms of spaces of memory in post-modern urbanism, he identifies the pre-modern city as physical landscape and collection of object that would enable recollections and embodiments of the past. The modern city, he argues, has arrived at a point, where authentic objects and material traces of the past in

form of e.g. historical buildings are “swept away, taking memory with them.”<sup>1</sup> Crinson suggests further to understand the role of memorials or every other forms of materialistic embodiment of memory as an act of compensation, with which the modern city balances this kind of decontextualization by merely replacing memory with “metaphorical tropes.”<sup>2</sup>

If we are to map the Topography of Terror and the Memorial Site Berlin-Hohenschönhausen in contemporary Berlin, we can certainly claim that the notion of a decontextualized place of remembrance does not hold true. Rather, the former Gestapo terrain and the former State Security Prison are material traces of two past experiences, which were not only bound indistinctively to the city’s physical landscape but also marked mental “memory-places” in the cognitive map of the human minds.

In this paper, I hope to describe how the meaning of two significant places in Germany’s capital - the former Gestapo Terrain in Berlin-Kreuzberg or the former State Security Prison in Berlin-Hohenschönhausen - changed in the course of time. Furthermore, I will try to examine, if these places as memorial sites are qualified for a critical engagement with past events and how their design, concepts, and pedagogical focus meet the demands of a modern form of memory-work. This new form can be characterized by a highly responsible, self-determined, and individual engagement of citizens that makes a cooperative interplay between the public realm and state officials indispensable for the realization of the project. The strong engagement with the two places and the active role citizens played in regards to design and organization of the memorial sites show

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Crinson, ed. *Urban Memory. History and Amnesia in the Modern City* (New York: Routledge, 2005), xi.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. xxi-xxiv.

furthermore that the historical approach and the pedagogical strategies of a memorial site are about to change in modern times.

The interim design of the Topography of Terror bears witness to this observation. In the late 1980s the unfinished memorial site met the beholders' demands for an interactive and self-reliant *Auseinandersetzung* with the past. This new form made a rather "bite-sized" approach to Germany's past almost obsolete. We shall see that Berlin's Senate unfortunately paved the way to such an approach with its decision to place a modern four-storey documentation center on the terrain (to be expected in 2010) and to replace a rather "anti-aesthetic" form of memorializing not only the Nazi past but also the contemporary engagement of Berlin's citizens with the hitherto abandoned Gestapo terrain.

In comparison, the memorial site in Berlin-Hohenschönhausen as material trace of the GDR gained more and more significance in Berlin's urban landscape after Germany's reunification. We shall see that former detainees of the State Security Prison heavily influenced the site's design and organization. Their active role in designing the memorial site marked the realization of this new form of memory-work as described above. As tour guides and members of the Foundation Berlin-Hohenschönhausen, former prisoners placed emphasize on their experience with the SED-regime and the State Security prison and thus decided to present the prison "as it was" in the GDR. In doing so, the memorial site in Berlin-Hohenschönhausen provides the opportunity to encounter the past in a self-reliant and individual way. Consequently, visitors are forced to acquire necessary information and ultimately take responsibility for their personal way of reconstructing the past or - even more important especially for former detainees or other victims of the

regime - to share a place of a traumatic experience that might help to work through these experiences.

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The former Gestapo terrain in Berlin was a well-known place during the Nazi era. It was well known to an extent that citizens even forced themselves to repress this stored memory for quite some time. The attempt to forget or at least ignore the place, which had spatially signified the wrongdoings of the Hitler regime and still fostered the painful notion of the German nation as perpetrators, was somewhat made 'easier' since the physical traces were erased from the visible surface of the cityscape. Not until the grassroots activists started digging for historical evidences and made the literarily unearthed memory visible again in 1985, Berlin's citizens believed to have buried the preserved memory of the place deep inside. Not to give the impression that only psychological mechanism were at work in the entire process of neglect: this willingness to repress the memories of the terrain's inscribed meaning was simultaneously maintained by the official policy of city planning in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> A self-critical engagement with the site was replaced by Berlin's attempt to build a "new city," as it were, and was accompanied with the hope that "Berlin will take its rightful place as a European capital."<sup>4</sup> The endeavor to reshape the city's appearance did not mean to abandon all material reminders of the past, especially monuments and memorials

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<sup>3</sup> Reinhard Rürup, *Topography of Terror. Gestapo, SS and Reichssicherheitshauptamt on the "Prinz Albrecht-Terrain."* A Documentation, trans. Werner T. Angress (Berlin: Verlag Willmuth Arenhövel, 1989), 218.

<sup>4</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Present Past. Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (California: Stanford University Press, 2003), 51.

that represent the wrongdoings of the Hitler regime. To build a “new city” did not mean to forget the legacies of the past. In fact, memorials that were established according to the FRG’s policy of remembering and honoring the victims of the Nazis played an integral part in Berlin’s attempt to redefine its city landscape. Incorporated in Berlin’s concepts of building a European metropolis, these kinds of memorials represented Germany’s effort of coming to terms with the past and portrayed the intensity of *Auseinandersetzung* with the Holocaust and the persecution of declared enemies of the Third Reich. More importantly, the official policy of remembering became not only a part of the city’s “new” identity but was also considered as being almost completed. The construction of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews in Europe as the apex of all attempts bears witness to this observation as plans for the memorial site were launched around the same time Berlin undertook the enterprise of reshaping the city’s appearance. The Memorial to the Murdered Jews in Europe thus served as final symbolic marker to remember the Holocaust, incorporate this dark chapter of German history in the physiognomy of the cityscape, and to complete the nation’s all-encompassing effort to work through the Nazi past.

With Berlin’s agenda to integrate Holocaust memorials into the urban landscape, the former Gestapo terrain intentionally fell prey to neglect and forgetting. With numerous public initiatives, however, Berlin’s citizens strongly attempted to include the abandoned terrain into concepts of remodeling the capital of Germany. Being confronted with the neglect of the vacant spot for several years, the attempt of making a significant place visible and render it important for Berlin’s future appearance resulted in the site’s official incorporation of the city planning. But the attempted transformation of the city

into a modern metropolis and the decision of Berlin's Senate to build a four-story documentation center as the linchpin of the site had great influence on the anticipated design of the Topography of Terror. Truly, the new design rather impaired the previous appearance of the site, which bore witness not only to a distinctive design of a memorial site as an "open wound" but also to a hitherto unknown form of coming to terms with the past. The previous arrangement of the site signified the engagement of numerous people and organizations with the past and rendered a new form of contemporary memory-work. This new form can be characterized by its highly responsible, self-determined, and individual engagement of Berlin's citizens with the past and their significant role in actively constructing the urban environment. Furthermore, the archeological approach that took place at the terrain in 1985 indicates the awareness that relics of the former Gestapo building might be buried underneath the terrain and should definitely be uncovered. Accordingly, the unearthed relics were considered a significant part of Berlin's landscape and ought to be prior for the design of the memorial site. The uncovered relics not only testified a new form of public memory-work but also marked the material vestiges of a past event. As an authentic symbol for the juncture of the past and present in the urban environment the unearthed relics became a point of reference that orients its beholders and creates meaning in both the cityscape and the beholders' recollection.

With the final decision to build a documentation center in the middle of the terrain, Berlin's Senate agreed to change the structural-material presence of the site tremendously. Before the final construction work had begun, the absence of completion, the uncovered ruins, the piles of rubble and then again the preservation of testimonies to

former times of abandonment in form of vacant spots, comprised a sense of spatial “anti-aesthetic.” In this kind of atmospheric environment the beholders were invited to engage in a process of reconstruction, an imagined act of piecing together the signs of material decay, and, most importantly, take responsibility for their individual way of remembering. Accordingly, the terrain gained a certain quality that generally is crucial for a public memorial space as it went beyond its mere historical referentiality. In its sheer infinite significance as monumental figuration, the terrain demanded a communicative approach between beholder and monumental representation that is imperative for the understanding and evocation of the past events. But we would ignore the ramifications in the present if we evaluated the Topography of Terror only according to its function of recalling and understanding a past event. The relationship of a memorial site and a visitor ultimately has consequences for the historical understanding in regard to the present time. In the process of reconstruction, the past ideally weaves itself into the visitor’s present experiences. Historical conclusions are reinvested with the own life and social actions.

Let us now turn to the former State Security Prison in Berlin-Hohenschönhausen and investigate the meaning for Berlin’s cityscape and its significance in terms of memorializing a past event. Truly, the prison complex undertook a significant shift of meaning since Germany’s reunification. As material traces in Berlin’s cityscape, however, the complex of Berlin-Hohenschönhausen continuously maintained its associations with the State Security apparatus of the GRD. Before Germany’s reunification, GDR official treated the facility as highly secret zone. They tried to seal off its surroundings from the public, and even concealed the location of the prison on city

maps. The fact that the prison was located at the margin of the city and in a common residential area made the place almost invisible in the urban landscape for the majority of GDR citizens. But even if most GDR citizens did not know exactly where the facilities were located, they certainly developed the awareness that several places in Berlin were occupied by those facilities. This awareness that the State Security operated these facilities and yet the lack of knowledge where exactly the State Security apparatus exercised its power significantly shaped the conscious and unconscious perception of Berlin's citizens in regard to their urban environment. The State Security Police successfully kept the population in the dark about the location and the modus operandi and simultaneously fostered the feeling of constant monitoring and surveillance as part of the every-day life of GDR citizens. Unlike the NS regime, the GDR did not depend on several material symbols, strategically located in the cityscape, from which constant threat and power could emanate. The threat and power was thus not necessarily linked to material traces and symbols. It unfolded its menacing permanence through its very existence. The power of the East German state remained ungraspable in a commonly shared place where either people suffered or profited from, kept still or supported the SED regime.

After reunification, the State Security prison in Berlin-Hohenschönhausen immediately became one of several significant markers for what the SED regime and the State Security in general now signified for a unified and democratic Germany. With the decision to maintain the entire complex as historical monument and eventually establish a memorial site, the facility became visible not only as material trace of the recent past. For the majority of Germans, it also revealed its very nature belated and in the present time.

The facilities gained meaning as Berlin's citizens and others alike could finally map the facility in the urban landscape. Not until officials and the public discussed the construction of a memorial site, the majority of the population learned in detail about the nature of State Security prison in particular and the apparatus of the SED regime in general. Those who were involved in the decision-making process had acknowledged the exclusive opportunity to reveal the interior, the basis, and the integral elements of this unique historical place. This observation leads to two major differences between the memorial site Topography of Terror and the memorial site in Berlin-Hohenschönhausen. Albeit both authentic and material traces of the past in Berlin's cityscape, the memorial sites have to serve totally different ways to approach the historical event. Due to a decades-long process of neglect, public counteractions, and official interventions, the anticipated Topography of Terror represents a past event that speaks to an audience that was almost exclusively born after the Third Reich. This observation might explain why design and concept of the memorial site will focus primarily on well-documented information and a more accessible way to encounter a past which is detached from most of its visitors. At the site in Berlin-Hohenschönhausen, however, the status as State Security prison became history within a few days. The prompt change and immediate experience of transition from present time to history grouped a far diverse audience of the quickly anticipated memorial. The former detainees as contemporary witnesses became tour guides, who share their experiences with visitors almost in a form of oral history. Visiting the terrain means thus to follow almost literally the traces of those who had been imprisoned. The "exhibition" is actually the place *itself* and demands an interactive and self-reliant approach to the facility and its history since the site represents its own

past without mediated material or additional explanation from moveable walls. The reason way the memorial site in Berlin-Hohenschönhausen requires a rather independent and individual way of remembering the past, can certainly be found in the variety of the audience to which the memorial site needs to speak. The site became a place for former GDR citizens who were eager to encounter a facility for the very first time that represents an example of a former State Security prison and ultimately represents a part of their own life in the former GDR. It probably became a place of regret, remorse or even threat or anger for those who anticipated or supported the regime. It became a place for thousands of interested people from Germany and beyond who could finally picture more thoroughly the system of the former SED regime that they had always heard of, observed or even criticized beyond the GDR borders. Finally the former detainees mark the most striking group. They had left the facilities as delinquents of the SED regime and returned as victims. They encounter a place to mourn, to remember and work through their experience. Besides the material authenticity the place embraced after reunification, the former victims and their experiences represent the most authentic and genuine source of information for the site and its visitors.

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In sum, we can state that Germany's memory-work has arrived at a state of multi-vocal expression of interests, which draw attention to the multilayered tasks a memorial site has to fulfill in modern urban landscapes. Memorial sites as significant textures in an urban environment and as points of historical referentiality evoke public attention and are

eventually shaped, design, and conceptualized by what a James Young, scholar of English and Judaic Studies in the United States, referred to as “collected memories.”<sup>5</sup>

The numerous contributions, interests, suggestions and critical voices that we can witness during the decision-making process for our memorial sites at hand derived from individual memories of or knowledge about past events. These places always remain material markers in the urban landscape that maintain and significantly shape memories and the awareness of the past. But even more important, the public engagement testifies a modern understanding of how important material reminders of the past are for the present time and the future. They are crucial for a self-reliant *Auseinandersetzung* with historical events and should ideally provide a truthful, honest, and undistorted approach to historical events, not for the sake of solely remembering an event but rather for the educational impact on present and future generations, which are among other things dependent on a symbolic representation of the past. Memorials as material markers thus represent a conglomerate of aspects, which society had defined crucial for a valuable approach to the past, a fruitful engagement with the present, and essential deliberation about the future. As we have seen, the Topography of Terror and the memorial site in Berlin-Hohenschönhausen try to fulfill all these purposes. Unlike the memorial site in Berlin-Hohenschönhausen, the Topography of Terror, however, will probably lack the most important aspect of modern memory-work: the visitor’s responsibility for their individual way of remembering, learning and reasoning about the past in order to

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<sup>5</sup> James Young, *The Texture of Memory. Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 5.

appropriate knowledge and reinvesting it with the own life and social actions of the present and the future.

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