

COLLECTIVE MEMORY, IDENTITY AND PLACE MAKING IN REUNIFIED BERLIN

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ABSTRACT

Berlin is a fascinating example of urban change with its specific history as a divided city. There are few places in the world where one can witness the self-destructive character of a city so intensively, a city always in search of erasing some parts of the past, while simultaneously maintaining others. The urban landscape of Berlin bears witness to the struggle between politics, history and place making, culminating in the question of a German national identity. This paper presents an investigation into the highly politicised city space of Berlin. After reunification, Berlin had to reposition itself and had to find a new image as Germany's new capital. At the same time, the city had to manage with inner-city struggles over a redefinition of identity in the unified city, including particularly symbolic sites of remembrance. It is argued that this definition process is largely influenced by architectural and urban planning. This means, politicians, architects and urban planners shape or give order to shape the image of a city and by that alter the city's basis for collective memory.

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INTRODUCTION

After reunification, Berlin had to face major political, economic, social, and cultural challenges. Besides these tough problems, the definition process of an integrated identity for Berlin was not of foremost concern. Nonetheless, this process of identity and image formation was inherent in the debate of the whole rebuilding of the city. In this sense, Berlin's urban policy in the last decade is characterised by both 'critical reconstruction' and 'aesthetics of place'.

This essay attempts to discuss to what extent the ambiguous relationship between the politics of national remembrance and the reconstruction of collective memories on the one hand, and strategic place making in Berlin on the other hand contribute to the emergence of a collective identity. It is argued that strategies of aesthetic place making run contrary to the politics of remembrance and the formation of a collective identity in reunified Berlin and are part of what Neill calls 'selective memory construction' (Neill, 2004).

The paper sets out with some theoretical considerations about questions of collective memory and the role of architecture and urban planning in identity formation and the image of a city manifesting itself in a set of questions. In a second step, the specific situation in Berlin will be analysed taking these questions into account. The paper concludes with a brief set of prospective thoughts on the future development of Berlin.

1. COLLECTIVE MEMORY, IDENTITY AND PLACE MAKING – SOME THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The paper is based on the theoretical linkage of the concepts of collective memory, identity and place making. The appreciation of collective memory is a central aspect of urban planning practice and is of central importance to the constitution of identity. In addition, it carries implications for place making and the built fabric of the city. Thus, architecture and urban planning form a strong part in shaping the identity of a city.

The definition of urbanity has become a new focus for the definition of personal and collective identities. In the past few years, a growing body of literature has emerged on the relation between architecture and the issues of collective memory and national identity (Halbwachs, 1992; Gillis, 1994; Koshar, 1994/2000; Delanty/Jones, 2002). Maurice Halbwachs (1992), one of the most influential philosophers on collective memory, stated that monuments and other topographical features are central in the formation of a collective memory and identity in the modern world. Identity has always been related to physical space; the German word for being alive, 'Dasein' (Heidegger) for example, literally meaning 'being there'. The common view is that cultural or collective memory is produced through and reflected in objects, images and representations. It is perceived to be located in specific places or objects, and is therefore a major significance for urban planning. Yet, this process of cultural or collective memory is bound in complex political stakes and meanings.

Here, the theoretical premise is that the building-architectural and the political decision-making elite create a particular identity, which will maintain and stabilise its position. The use of buildings to articulate control and power is not a new phenomenon. It has been used throughout history to indicate who is in control and what facets of group or national identity the ones in power want to project. This points to a dialectic relationship between the creation of the self, meaning and identity formation, and the construction of the city. According to Bounds (2004), this "dialectic relationship between the form and the experience of the form is mobilised in the selling of the city" (Bounds, 2004: 115).

The concept of constructing and 'selling' the image of a city or region has become essential in new urban politics and marketing strategies in many post-industrial cities. Harvey

characterizes this development of city marketing and place making, which is often accompanied by a turn to post-modern styles of architecture and urban design, as the new 'urban entrepreneurialism'. According to him "the active production of places with special qualities becomes an important stake in spatial competition between localities, regions, and nations" (Harvey, 1989: 295).

The consequences on the people, the populace, however, remain somewhat unclear. What effect on the formation of identity have the changes associated with such marketing strategies? Will they integrate the population or alienate parts from it through cultural or social biases? Which "identity" is seen fit for a whole city? Which segments of the inhabitants are represented? In an environment of contested meanings and identities can all the city's inhabitants identify with their city while at the same time an attractive image is presented to potential tourists and investors? In particular, how long can a tension between 're-invented' urban culture and city history promoted by city development professionals, investors and even politicians, and the various local cultures and memories that shape the city be maintained?

A perfect example of this conflict is Berlin. It is a city in constant redefinition of its identity and its image. After reunification, Berlin faces a new challenge in bringing together East and West in one city space. Furthermore, the new old capital of Germany had to face an even greater challenge and responsibility in serving as a symbol for a divided society to (re-) shape a German national identity. Another challenge for Berlin was that it had to reposition itself on the national and global scale.

2. ISSUES OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY, IDENTITY AND PLACE MAKING IN BERLIN

Berlin is characterised by numerous symbolic landscapes, and urban planning is occupied with deciding which image and which past to present. David Cosgrove has maintained that the city "will be the critical place in which cultural contests of nationalism, supranationalism, pluralism and even global post-modernism will be played out and find spatial expression" (Cosgrove, 1990: 565). Indeed, the city appears as a fragmented landscape, in which all discontinuities, all historical and ideological breaks are visible. Peter Marcuse, in 'Reflections on Berlin' examines the role that architecture plays in the construction of image through building sites (Marcuse, 1998). He states that Berlin represents the "ultimate landscape of power – not because of its form but because of its construction" (Marcuse, 1998: 333). Marcuse is correct in identifying that the focus of power is in who controls what is built. However, the historical element of identity creation makes the 'form' (design) of contemporary and past structures a key element in the debates surrounding Berlin's buildings.

According to Gittus (2002), Berlin is susceptible to an analysis of the link between past, present and place in identity formation for several reasons: first, the resonance of German history can be found in buildings all over the city: Secondly; the city, at last, was host to two opposing regimes, which attempted to create competing realities in one (divided) city space; and thirdly, the major physical legacy of the 20th century has bequeathed an unprecedented amount of free inner-city land to Government, developers and investors. Hence, given this amplitude of space for different projections it is not surprising that struggles about representation, identity and memory found their way into the political and urban planning discourse.

In fact, after reunification, architects, urban planners, politicians and investors have actively used Berlin to project images of Germany. Apart from competing claims as to where Berlin and Germany should be heading (Cochrane/Jonas, 1999), Berlin had to reposition itself on the national and global level. Here, Berlin had to compete with its own past which has

become both an 'obstacle' and a 'facilitator' in marketing the capital (Gittus, 2002). This includes the legacy of industrialisation and the influence of two economies inhabiting one city space. Not only has the city had to cope with various fashions of capitalist and communist architecture, but also many normal urban and civic functions appear twice in Berlin. Since the early 1990s, Berlin has also had to cope with a population move with large parts of the population moving to the suburbs (Hoffmann, 2000), and a move of young people to Berlin leading to a constant rejuvenation of some districts. Another problem is the huge debt in the city's treasury. These issues are played out against the backdrop of unusual urban development, or lack of it, in the 40 years of division. It is assumed that, due to the distinctive situation in Berlin as a reunited city and returned capital, the fragmentation and regeneration which occurred in other urban environments in the late 20th century were postponed in Berlin.

The first concept that sets out an integrated urban master plan for the divided inner city was the 'Planwerk Innenstadt' (produced by the Berlin Ministry of Urban Development and Environmental Protection and adopted by the Berlin Senate in 1999). In the Planwerk Innenstadt, Berlin officially has been redefined under the concept of 'critical reconstruction'. This is relevant in that it is designed to re-create and strengthen relationships between the two city centres, to re-expose a common history and future, and to assist the further development of these city centre identities (Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung, 1998). The Planwerk Innenstadt proposes to use design to suture together both parts of the previously divided city through the invocation of a history common to both East and West. This concept, however, has been criticised as a direct challenge to the urbanistic design of East Berlin. Some architectural and urban planning critics maintain that the decision to erase the urbanistic heritage of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) means that the East German city is denied the right to have its own history in reunified Berlin (i.e. Rem Koolhaas, Phillip Oswald, Oswald Mathias Ungers). This supports the argumentation that urban design and planning is being used as an instrument of selective memory construction, very often emphasizing a common German past before the 1930s, when Berlin was a more classically beautiful city in the European tradition. Indeed, as Huyssen (1994) points out, this critical reconstruction is a false continuity with pre-war national past. It rather marks a shift from modernist city-scapes and concepts to post-modern nostalgic urbanism. Will this nostalgic reconstruction, however, be able to contribute to the reconstruction of a collective identity in reunified Berlin? As a romantic image of an idealised past and particular architectural aesthetics will it be able to support a common identification for the East Germans and foreign population of Berlin?

This may be doubted for two reasons: First, the proposal for reconstruction of a prominent site such as the site of the former Stadtschloss in the centre of Berlin is a perfect example of what Harvey calls the 'mobilisation of spectacle' (Harvey, 1989), emerging, however, as a fragile and premature instrument of reunification. A second, probably more important point is that the proposals for historical reconstruction do not contribute positively to the attempt to create a collective (post-national) German identity because they do not open up a new discourse about identity within architecture that transcends nationalism.

Within the last few years, however, it has been more and more recognised also by the city's elite that historical and urban breaks in Berlin make the city so unique and attractive to people, young and old, tourists and inhabitants. It has become increasingly clear, "that architecture is not only responsible for shaping collective memories but also provides a cultural potential for the expression of new identities" (Delanty/Jones, 2001: 464). Hence, the quality of debate has changed and it has been felt by many that the return to the 19th century is not the right way forward into a 21st century democracy. The struggle over façade architecture, historical justice, and a contested memory is turning into a constructive debate about the function of public, social and cultural spaces in a post-industrialist capitalist city.

This appears as a welcome step in direction of reflection and creation of a reflexive post-national identity in Berlin.

CONCLUSION

The paper has outlined that architecture is a crucial component in shaping collective memory and in creating and reflecting identities. In Berlin, national and cultural remembrance and aesthetical reconstruction have played a central part in debates surrounding architectural and urban planning, and thus in identity formation and the creation of an urban image. Daniel Libeskind speaks of a “need to resist the erasure of history, the need to respond to history, the need to open the future: that is, to delineate the invisible on the basis of the visible” (Libeskind, 1999: 127). It is this reflexive relationship with the past and the ambiguous relationship with the future that best characterises Berlin’s situation today.

In the future development of Berlin, this paradox, this tension between past and present with its breaks and discontinuities has to be maintained. It is this complexity that characterizes best the overall concept and the image of Berlin, and that distinguishes Berlin from most other metropolises. The heterogenic, hybrid structure enables the city to enlarge, thus offering citizens the space for participation, and offering urban planners the possibility to show a more sensitive, future-oriented interaction with the city and its inhabitants.

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