

In Evidence: Witnessing Cities and the Case of Berlin
An international interdisciplinary conference
12-14 July 2007

This 2.5-day international conference focused on the contemporary city as a witness to changing political topographies and socio-economic transformations, which is in turn witnessed by a multitude of cultural undertakings. Organised by members of the Departments of German & Dutch and Architecture at the University of Cambridge, the conference was conceived as a forum for academics, artists and practitioners from different disciplinary backgrounds. Speakers included architects, sociologists, historians, geographers, media and culture scholars, as well as installation and performance artists. The presentations from top scholars and practitioners were complemented by panels dedicated to current PhD research and by artists' presentations. A performance-lecture and a specifically designed exhibition space with screenings, sound installations and posters complemented the programme. The conference was organised in cooperation with the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities at Cambridge (CRASSH) and kindly supported by the Departments of German and Architecture, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and by private sponsorship raised by Shape East, the centre for architecture and the built environment in the East of England.

Considering how the city has become a key site for investigations in the arts, humanities and social sciences, the interdisciplinary scope of the conference aimed to stimulate cross-sector discussion and raise awareness among scholars of linkages and frictions between their respective approaches to place-making, the politics of memory in the contemporary city, and the transformations of the urban fabric. Organised in two strands, the conference first engaged with generic issues of the city as a witness to political and social alterations to and in urban topographies, as well as with 'the urban' as an entity that is itself witnessed by the cultural undertakings emerging in and about the built environment. Specific contributions dwelt on the mapping of memorial sites in post-conflict urban places, and the marking of these through cultural interventions, but private engagements with memory, history and displacement in urban topographies – as well as representations thereof – also considered the potentially contested nature of such remembrance. Taking the changing nature of individual or collective recourse to storage, archive and memorialisation as their theme, other papers concentrated on the impact of digital and technological advances on urban memory cultures. The second strand of the conference sought to take the measure of the modes of witnessing at work in cities by concentrating analyses on a single one: Berlin. As an urban icon with a uniquely drastic twentieth-century political history, it became apparent that Berlin often assumes a paradigmatic status for rethinking the construction and conflict of ideologies in urban form. Not only examining the official effort of memorialisation and reconstruction in central Berlin sites, papers also discussed how these may be at odds with the inadvertently registered urban interventions that contest what should be made evident in, and taken in evidence of, the city. Again, familial genealogies of specific sites, as they intersect with public narratives and sediments of historical conflict were made to correlate with institutional representations of memorial culture and place-making in this European capital.

Day 1

Richard Sennett and Daniel Libeskind

The opening afternoon was devoted to public lectures and question-and-answer sessions with sociologist Richard Sennett and architect Daniel Libeskind. Sennett's lecture, entitled 'The Architecture of Justice', explored a potential linkage between the organisation of space in judicial systems and the necessity for a just use of space in our cities at a time of drastic scarcity of resources. Libeskind's presentation, in conversation with architectural historian and theorist Peter Carl (Cambridge), explored the development of his work in its aesthetic, ethical, political, and practical aspects. The Jewish Museum in Berlin was given particular emphasis. Both lectures were followed by lively discussion, and a closing question drew out the interesting tension between Sennett's programme for a scaling down of urban architecture and the large-scale physical and symbolic vision of Libeskind's work.

Day 2

Karen Till

Karen Till examined two types of memorial cartographies that create conceptual, metaphorical and material space-times for witnessing and re-encountering cities marketed as "new". Using the case of Cape Town, she considered how memorial cartographies may represent the resurfacing of the past in the postcolonial city. She then investigated artistic mappings (installations, performances, conceptual memorials) in Cape Town and Berlin that create situations for visitors and citizens to reencounter their city through the interruption of quotidian urban routines. Memorial cartographies, she argued, disrupt established zones of social belonging in the contemporary city through acts of discovery, juxtaposition and bodies in motion.

Geoffrey Kantaris

Examining the socio-spatial transformation of the urban world in conjunction with its reworking in Latin American film and media, Geoffrey Kantaris (Latin American Studies, Cambridge) focused on Argentinean cyberpunk film. Particularly, he drew on the figure of the cyborg, situated cinematically in the Latin American mega-city, to show its relation with dystopian projections and imploded social and cultural identities, thus condensing anxieties about the loss of local autonomy and cultural memory. At the interface of the organic and the machinic, he argued, the cyborg becomes a cipher for prosthetic and celluloid memory processes, as they play out in a megalopolis caught up within global networks, knowledge systems and media regimes.

Graduate Panel 1

The first graduate panel represented an architectural approach to the problem of the contemporary city with presentations by the two architects Irina Davidovici (PhD student, Cambridge) and Inderbir Riar (PhD student, Columbia) and an art historian Philipp Ekardt (PhD student, Yale). The three presentations circled around one theme: how the legacy of modernist architecture from the early twentieth century is negotiated in contemporary art and architecture practice and scholarship. This theme was then investigated from three different angles, ranging from questions of contemporary Swiss

architecture and the problem of adding urban qualities to suburban areas to the legacy of 1960's visions of the mega-structure, as given in the Expo67 in Montreal, to reflections on architecture and the city in works by two contemporary German artists.

Henrik Reeh

How we experience well-known but often overlooked spaces in the city was the topic of Henrik Reeh's (Comparative Literature and Modern Culture, Copenhagen) talk. The paper built on photographic evidence from several trips to Berlin of a generic type of journey, that of 'travelling to the airport', which tends to be overlooked in representations of (urban) travel. In the last example, however, the experience of leaving the city was influenced by the almost disastrous failure of Berlin's infrastructure to carry the traveller from the city centre to the airport. In no time, what used to be a routine journey brought about an estranged and anxious traveller who moved through yet unknown areas of the city, unable to control time.

Edward Dimendberg

Continuing the theme of experiencing and representing the city through visual evidence and memory, Edward Dimendberg (Film, California/Irvine) then spoke on the interactive narrative database 'Bleeding Through--Layers of Los Angeles, 1920-1986' (by Norman Klein, published ZKM). He discussed the digital database as the *Gesamtmedium* for our age: as a utility with which to navigate the (memories of the) city at higher levels and at higher speeds. He proposed to call these 'counterbases' because of the false Baudelairian correspondences they foster – completely meaningless connections that become semiotically coded, trifle gestures in photos or in unreferenced press snippets that turn into allegories.

Victor Burgin

A personal reflection on the representation – and representability – of memory, melancholia and mourning, Victor Burgin took the audience on a journey through 19th and 20th century intellectual history. Passing Freud, Benjamin, Proust, Barthes, Nora, Augé, Huberman and Sebald, among others, he reflected on communal commemoration and individual memory in their relation to place and practice. With a particular focus on the affixation of memories to specific sites (*lieux de mémoire*) and their counterparts, dissociative and empty 'non-lieux', he read these as different – and differently successful – approaches to remembrance and forgetting: to witnessing absence. Arguing for monuments of melancholy rather than those of mourning, he privileged a reading of history as incomplete and unrealised, a repository of alternative histories, best to be explored in the blind spots and memorial traces of the non-lieux de mémoire.

Grad Panel 2

The second graduate panel concentrated on the arts' response to cities and urban spaces, the three presentations focusing respectively on sound art, visual art, and literature. Firstly, Anne Riker Purcell (Art and Archaeology, Princeton) explored the audio walks by Canadian sound artist Janet Cardiff with particular regard to their temporality, understanding how against the mutability of the city, buildings, monuments, and landscape designs act as repositories of history and memory. Moving from sound to photography, Jennifer Burris (French, Cambridge) brought early discourses on the medium together with a metaphor of ghostliness drawn from spiritualist history and Derrida's notion of the revenant to bear upon cultural assumptions regarding the nature of photography and the empty city as a site of spectrality. Gesturing towards the

following Berlin-focused day, Áine McMurtry (German, Oxford) concluded the panel by exploring Ingeborg Bachmann's 1960s Berlin 'Ein Ort für Zufälle', the author's acceptance speech for the 1964 Büchner Prize, as well as correspondence, poetry and photographs, in order to show how Bachmann sought to forge a new poetic language to bear witness to the troubled social reality of the day.

Stih & Schnock

Berlin artists Renata Stih and Frider Schnock's presentation operated as a bridge between the first conference strand on urbanity and memory, and the second day to be devoted to Berlin, by discussing and projecting elements of their work under the conceptual header, 'The City as Text'. Placing a particular emphasis on the 'Places of Remembrance' project, realised in Berlin's Bavarian Quarter (1992-3) and involving eighty visual and textual plaques commemorating the gradual elimination of the Jewish population during National-Socialism, they also presented other interventions in and about urban public space. Reactions from the public, authorities, academics and the media to such works on cities and evidence were equally bound into the discussion.

Day 3

Thomas Elsaesser

Starting off the day devoted to Berlin, Thomas Elsaesser (Media and Culture: Amsterdam) offered an idiosyncratic reading of the work of Leberecht Migge, 'der gruene Bolchevik', within an intimate social circle including Martin Elsaesser and Elisabeth Elsaesser. In so doing, he proposed an outline for a private 'hauntology' of space, which he linked to early 1920s/1930s ideas about ecological living (humorously sketched out in pictures of an Abfallbaum-Apfelbaum for instance) and, again, to private, organically evolved forms of memorialisation -- what he called das Wachende Denkmal (The Waking/Guarding Monument).

Mary Fulbrook

Berlin, a symbol of much of twentieth-century European history, is now arguably one of the most historically self-aware cities in the world, historian Mary Fulbrook argued in her paper. Yet the narratives implied by the representations of Nazism and Communism in the well-trodden routes of 'historical tourism'⁹⁰ provide a distorted picture of the two dictatorships. Berlin is not a palimpsest, Fulbrook insisted; and conflicting significations and omissions require an effort of historical imagination beyond the selective visual representations of Berlin's multiple pasts.

Stefanie Bürkle

Berlin-based artist Stefanie Bürkle, working with and in between photography, painting and cross-disciplinary media, presented and discussed her projects on Berlin's changing urban spaces. Literally staging references to stage design and scenography and their parallels to the architectural environment and city planning in the German capital, her projects aim to grant a look behind the façades of urban appearance, and make the layers of signification, construction and interest inherent in the 'scenographic city' evident.

Graduate Panel 3

The third graduate panel circled around the nature of Berlin as seen from three perspectives – as a scene for particular life-styles, as a ground for changing understandings of the good life and as a problem of designation. The first presentation by Anja Schwanhäüßer (European Ethnology, Humboldt University) mapped out the particular forms of urban living that have recently developed around the techno scene in Berlin. Max Hirsh (Design, Harvard) traced the shifts in social policy that led to the redevelopment plans for East Berlin's Mitte during the final decade of the GDR, emphasising a largely overlooked aspect of policy-making: the attempt to re-densify East German cities through the construction of historicising *Plattenbau* complexes. The final presentation by Julia Ng (German Literature and Critical Thought, Northwestern University) traced in a philosophical discussion what might be implied in the name 'Berlin' by harking back to Maurice Blanchot's text from 1964.

Janet Ward

Janet Ward investigated how the former Berlin Wall's "wounded land" – its inverse status, like a photographic negative – is marking the renewed capital of Germany. There is, she argued a certain continuity of the Wall's *discontinuity*, not just for Berlin but for reunified German identity. Berlin's uncharted, de-scripted, and unsettling derelict territories enable, according to Ward, a creative psycho-geographical rewriting of the urban condition. Such border zones emerging after the Wall serve to de-centre a city which, thanks to war, division, and reunification, has already lost, remade, and is now making again its original axes.

Charity Scribner

Charity Scribner (European Studies, MIT) spoke on recently transpired striking connections between the Western anarchists and the East German Stasi as well as on a streak of anti-Semitism that seems to have shot through the RAF. Taking Dieter Kunzelmann's 'Aussteiger' identity as a case in point, touching briefly on the aesthetic dimension of German militancy and referencing Thomas Elsaesser's account on the subject, she proposed a 'second topography or terror' to describe the post-unification present.

Graduate Panel 4

The fourth graduate panel took as its theme the strategies and policies involved in symbolically and practically reconstructing, memorialising, and archiving the city's (and nation's) political and historical past. Dacia Viejo-Rose (Archaeology, Cambridge) spoke on the post-civil war reconstruction of Spain, and the particular case of Guernica, as a clear example of the signifying function of ruins, buildings and cities as the narratives of cities are forged anew. Following in similar terrain, Uta Protz ((History and Civilization, European University Institute Florence) explored how the urban and historic specificity of Berlin has conditioned the commemoration of two revolutionary leaders – Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht – to the present day. Concluding the panel, Brigitta Wagner (German, Harvard) focused on Wim Wenders' film 'Himmel über Berlin' and the multimedia project 'The Invisible Shape of Things Past' as differing approaches to representing Berlin's multilayered past via the contested site of Potsdamer Platz; an urban site that evokes not only the urban modernity of the 1920s but also wartime destruction, Cold War division, and postwall global fantasies.

Nachbar & Roller

The last event of the conference, this dancer-choreographer duo from Berlin poignantly raised and performed a great number of issues that had appeared in the papers and discussions. Generating a performance-lecture, they both literally re-presented and commented on their performance piece *mnemonic non-stop*, in which the anatomy of cities is examined through choreographic-geographic excursions. Historical events, geopolitical relations, personal chance encounters and observations are marked and projected on a layer of city maps and integrated into the dance performance. The following Q&A allowed the conference members to abstract from the performed concepts and return them to those treated in multiple shapes and forms throughout the 2,5-day event in Cambridge.