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'It has to go away, but at the same time it has to be kept': the Berlin Wall and the making of an urban icon

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ABSTRACT: For 28 years, from 13 August 1961 through 9 November 1989, the city of Berlin was divided by a wall. The borderline was the symbol for the Cold War and the political partition between East and West – but it was also an element of the urban structure: Berliners in the two parts of the city had to live with it and to define themselves in relation to it. After the fall of the wall and its destruction in the euphoric mood of re-unification, a huge inner-urban wasteland became the symbol for the need of a new politics of memory: the missing Berlin Wall became an urban icon.

What business do we have in Berlin? Memories.
Uwe Johnson

After the end of World War II, the allied forces of the Soviet Union, the United States, the United Kingdom and France agreed on the establishment of four zones of military occupation in the whole of Germany as well as in the capital city, Berlin. During the first years after 1945, there was large-scale co-operation between the forces, but with the rising tension between the Western allies and the Soviet Union, the onset of the Cold War and the foundation of two German states – the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) on 23 May 1949, and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) on 7 October 1949 – Berlin became the central place of rising confrontation between the two political and economic systems on both sides of what was to be called the 'iron curtain'.[1] Tensions often evolved at or around the border crossing points between the occupation zones, from Checkpoint Alpha near Helmstedt (Lower Saxony) via Checkpoint Beta at the entrance of West Berlin to the most famous one of all, Checkpoint Charlie, which marked the main inner-city

[1] Recent English publications about the history of Berlin include Alexandra Richie, *Faust's Metropolis. A History of Berlin* (New York, 1998), and David Clay Large, *Berlin* (New York, 2000). For the immediate post-war period see Wolfgang Benz, *Potsdam 1945. Besatzungsherrschaft und Neuaufbau im Vier-Zonen-Deutschland* (Munich, 1986).

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Figure 1: Sector sign at Checkpoint Charlie (December 1961) (Landesarchiv Berlin)

crossing point. It interrupted the central south-western axis of Berlin's Friedrichstraße, separating the two halves of a city – and at the same time the two political systems and ideological formations whose contest and confrontation characterized the course of the second half of the twentieth century in Europe (Figure 1).[2]

In the course of time, Checkpoint Charlie became synonymous with the situation of Berlin: a city divided and separated by a wall that had been erected by the GDR government starting on 13 August 1961. While the borderline between West Berlin and the surrounding parts of the GDR

[2] For a reliable history of the early years see Alan S. Milward, *The Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1945–51* (Berkeley, 1984); Norman M. Naimark, *The Russians in Germany. A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945–1949* (Cambridge, 1995). For the later period, see Ann Tusa, *The Last Division. A History of Berlin 1945–1989* (Reading, MA, 1997); Peter Wyden, *Wall. The Inside Story of Divided Berlin* (New York, 1989).

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was 114.6 kilometres long (111.9 in 1989), the inner-city wall separated the 'Western' and 'Eastern' parts of Berlin at a length of 45.9 kilometres (43.1 in 1989). This wall stood for nearly 28 years, its guard posts were 'perfected' from year to year. It is estimated that 254 people were killed when, and because, they tried to cross the wall in Berlin.[3] At the height of mass demonstrations against the collapsing socialist system, this wall 'broke down' or 'was opened' more by chance on 9 November 1989, when a Communist Party official mixed up his papers during a press conference. After the huge demonstration of 4 November 1989, when nearly one million people on Berlin's Alexanderplatz demanded democracy and free elections, government and party officials decided that regulations for free travel should be implemented as a way to calm the situation down. 'When will these new rules be applied?' a journalist asked. And Mister Schabowski stuttered, 'Nach meiner Kenntnis ist das ... sofort, unverzüglich' (in my knowledge this is ... at once, immediate). A few hours later, inhabitants of East Berlin cautiously approached the crossing points, debated with the guards, and were finally allowed to enter the Western part of the city for a night of happy celebrations.

From its erection to its fall (both notions should be seen as describing longer periods of time, not only the specific days between 13 August 1961 and 9 November 1989) the Berlin Wall had been a symbol for many things. In the eyes of the 'Free West', it represented the brutality and inhumanity of the communist system; for Communist Party officials, it was the 'antifascist wall of protection' which kept Western-imperialist influences out of the small country. For a more distant observer, it illustrated the absurdity of the situation in divided Europe (in many cases it was, after all, possible to cross the border, since Willy Brandt's politics of détente in the early 1970s). The wall was a symbol, but it had not yet become an 'icon'. This quality came later, after the real wall itself had been almost completely demolished and the *site* of the wall had become a *sight* (of something one could not see anymore). The real wall has more or less disappeared, but a new 'wall' stood for a while at (the former) Checkpoint Charlie.

In September 2004, the 'Haus am Checkpoint Charlie', a museum for the history of the wall and a memorial place for its victims, inaugurated a new monument. A wall was erected some 20 metres away from its original place, in order not to disturb the traffic, painted in white (and declared a 'piece of art' in order to get the official permission; after all, who can just come and build a wall in the centre of Berlin?). Several hundred black crosses, bearing the names of victims of the border regime, were planted in the ground (Figure 2). The artistic intervention should

[3] Numbers differ, the 'Arbeitsgemeinschaft 13. August' estimates that in total 957 people died because of the wall regime, including those who were killed before 13 Aug. 1961, at the inner-German border, on the Baltic Sea or in an attempt to cross the borders from Hungary, Bulgaria or Poland, including also border troops and Soviet soldiers who attempted to escape. Alexandra Hildebrandt, *Die Mauer. Zahlen. Daten* (Berlin, 2001), 75.

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Figure 2: The new memorial wall at Checkpoint Charlie, erected in 2004 by Alexandra Hildebrandt (photo: Mike Wolff, Der Tagesspiegel (2 Nov. 2004)

have been limited to the end of the year 2004, and officials in Berlin announced that they would not tolerate such a private initiative for longer. But nothing happened for a long time, and the monument was tolerated until autumn 2005. The improvised memorial was described by journalists and art critics as 'kitschy' and 'inadequate'. Criticism was especially directed against the artificial (re-)erection of a wall – several metres away from the place where the real wall once had stood. On the other hand, representatives of the victims and tourism managers argued in favour of the new monument – for different reasons. Their position made clear that something like a central memorial for the victims of the wall was needed, and the existing places of memory seemed inadequate. It was also a good place to send the many tourists who come to Berlin and want to see 'the wall'. It seems that the memory of 'the wall' – a building, a political fact, a symbol – does indeed need some piece of concrete wall, be it 'real' or 'false', in order to visualize and symbolize this memory.

The absurd situation on Berlin's Friedrichstraße marks only one stage in a longer process which had begun with the first breach in the concrete structure of the wall in November, 1989, but it took some years before the debates

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about the future of the vanishing symbol of the past achieved a certain form and public interest. On 14 June 1995, Berlin's *Senate* administration for Building and Housing, Department for Architecture and Urban Planning, Sub-Department 'Art in Public Space'; the Senate's administration for Culture; the Academy of Arts; and finally, the Berlin Forum for History and Presence organized a 'Hearing on the Marking of the Course of the Wall'. The very contradictory sounding German word is 'Mauerverlauf', but the idea should be clear. Once upon a time there was a wall. It had a certain course, it 'ran' – although it did not move – through Berlin. But then, one fine day, it was taken away so thoroughly that this former 'course' was not recognizable any more. Therefore 'it' – the former course of something which had disappeared – had to be 'marked'. Experts were expected to venture their opinions on this project in the 'Hearing', participants came from the city's administration, as did architects, urban planners, artists and historians. They discussed the 'memorial culture in the Wall area' and heard lectures such as 'The different approaches to the further development of Berlin's memorial culture: a critical stock-taking.' Both titles made it clear that the project of marking the former course of the wall should be integrated into a larger concept of Berlin's 'memorial culture' in general and that the question of how to deal with urban spaces was connected to a wide range of historical events of the twentieth century in Berlin.[4]

The greater part of this memorial culture – street names, several streets declared as 'Geschichtsmeilen' (history miles), memorial tablets, monuments, works of art – has, one way or another, to do with the legacy of the Nazi regime. How should the memory of the wall (as a building, as a symbol, as a place where people have been killed just because they wanted to cross a border) be conceptualized in this field of contesting *lieux de mémoire*? The interplay of historical presence/absence is very obvious, for example, at the former Gestapo headquarters. After a long period of post-war neglect and abuse, the ruins and cellars of the building complex were excavated in the 1980s and turned into a memorial and information place, the 'Topography of Terror'.[5] Visitors see the remnants of the Gestapo buildings and learn about the history of national-socialist terror on information tablets – but they stand in the shadow of the remnants of the Berlin Wall which ran along Käthe Niederkirchner-Straße (Figure 3).

[4] There is a huge amount of scholarly literature on Berlin's memorial culture. The most detailed reference book is Holger Hübner's *Das Gedächtnis der Stadt: Gedenktafeln in Berlin* (Berlin, 1997). James E. Young has dealt extensively with Germany's and Berlin's 'culture of memory' in *The Texture of Memory. Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven and London, 1993). Professor Young was appointed by the Berlin Senate to the five-member Findungskommission for Germany's national 'Memorial to Europe's Murdered Jews', under construction in Berlin. A general assessment of Germany's *lieux de mémoire* has been rendered by Etienne François and Hagen Schulze (eds.), *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte*, 3 vols. (Munich, 2001).

[5] Information about the place, the institution and related literature can be found on the website of the foundation 'Topographie des Terrors', http://www.topographie.de.

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Figure 3: The exhibition 'Topography of Terror' next to remnants of the wall in Berlin's Käthe Niederkirchner-Straße (private)

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Figure 4: The 'marking' of the wall at Heinrich-Heine-Straße, Summer 2004 (private)

Today, almost ten years after the hearing, the plans have become reality. Two narrow rows of cobblestones symbolize the former course of the Berlin Wall (Figure 4) or at least of the one part of the wall system which faced the Western part of the once-divided city. From 13 August 1961, until 9

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November 1989, the borderline between East and West Berlin consisted of two walls, a 'Vorderlandmauer' and a 'Hinterlandmauer', the space between the two walls was filled with watch towers, dog-runs and mine fields. But it was the picture of the wall facing the West that became known all over the world. Again: this wall had become the symbol for the partition of the city (and the political world). This wall has been opened because a Communist Party official mixed up his notes on 9 November 1989. This wall was destroyed almost completely (with several important exceptions which will be described here) in the euphoric first weeks and months of the unification process. And only after the almost complete destruction a new interest in the 'wall' as a symbol – of so many things – emerged. The meeting at the Academy of Arts in June 1995 was the start of a memoralization process which is still at work. The absent wall became a motif for postcards, books ('Where did the Berlin Wall run?'), photo shoots, memorial rituals and guided tours. If one asks any tourist who comes to the city now what he or she came looking for, they all would respond: the wall. And they cannot find it. Therefore it had to be replaced by different forms of memorial practices. It is as a result of this constellation, I would maintain, that the Berlin Wall has become an urban icon.

On walls

Walls are basic elements of cities. In his important book, *Stadtrechts-Alterthümer*, Heinrich Gottfried Gengler describes the fundamental laws that 'ruled' a city in the middle ages. He writes about streets, markets, town halls, churches, Jewish quarters. He gives information about the legal foundations of every urban element. But the first chapter is dedicated to the city wall. The wall around a city defines the city and separates it from the countryside and outside world.[6] In places where the wall has survived from the middle ages – Lucca in Tuscany, Carcassonne in southern France, Rothenburg ob der Tauber in Germany – it can surely be counted amongst the most impressive and well-known symbols of these cities.[7]

Walls have also been used in inner-urban contexts, as a means of separation between groups. In the context of Jewish history the idea and concept of the 'ghetto' is a subject of debate. On the one hand, obviously, the establishment of a ghetto – usually defined by surrounding walls – can be described as an instrument of rule where the minority is being separated from the rest of the population, an act of discipline which prevents contact and exchange between the social or ethnic groups in the city. On the other hand, some historians have argued that the existence behind the walls of

[6] Heinrich Gottfried Gengler, *Deutsche Stadtrechts-Alterthümer* (Erlangen, 1882).
[7] For Berlin, see Dieter Hoffmann-Axthelm, *Ludovica Scarpa: Berliner Mauern und Durchbrüche*, Berliner Topografien 7 (Berlin, 1987).

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the ghettos was crucial for the survival of the Jewish minority and their struggle to maintain an inner coherence.[8]

The idea of enlightenment in general and of the Jewish Enlightenment, the *Haskala*, was closely connected to the image of a wall – torn down. When Prussian reformers came to the newly acquired lands in Poland, after the final partition of Poland in 1795, they first set their eyes on the many city walls that could be destroyed in the name of progress and reform. The idea of freedom and liberation is closely connected to the destruction of walls; only when the ideas of enlightenment and emancipation were rejected under the Nazi regime were walls erected once more, especially in the occupied cities of Poland – although not in the city of Berlin which never in its history had a Jewish ghetto. In any case, allusions to the notion of 'ghetto' were rarely made in connection with the Berlin Wall – mostly because of the strange dialectics of 'inside' and 'outside' in this case: who was 'behind' the wall?

Both types of walls, the one surrounding the whole inner city, and the one that cuts through a part of the city and creates urban segments, can be analysed in the context of urban *form*: walls can separate a city from the countryside. They create a dialectical relationship of 'inside' and 'outside'; movement and traffic are analysed in connection to walls and borders. Walls are usually interrupted by gates, and the action of entering or leaving a place is connected to this opening in the wall. Even when the wall itself had been destroyed, the city gates were saved from destruction: not just for aesthetic reasons, perhaps, but also as reminders, or symbols, of the idea of openings and opportunities. For many years (until today), the Brandenburg Gate was one of the most important 'icons' of Berlin, although it did not function as a gate anymore (Figure 5).

But when a wall is built into, and very often against, an existing urban form, it cuts through older lines of communication and new systems have to be established on both sides. This was the case when, in August 1961, the East German government decided to isolate the Soviet sector of occupied Berlin from the American, English and French sectors. The allied forces of the USA, Great Britain and France had liberated the region of Thuringia and exchanged it with the Russians for some other parts, 'sectors', of Berlin. Thus, the districts Kreuzberg, Neukölln, Schöneberg, Steglitz, Tempelhof and Zehlendorf became 'American', Charlottenburg, Wilmersdorf, Spandau and Tiergarten became 'British', Reinickendorf and Wedding became 'French', whereas Mitte, Friedrichshain, Lichtenberg, Prenzlauer Berg, Pankow, Treptow and Weißensee stayed 'Russian'. The Allied Control Council formed the city's government. Until 13 August

[8] See Ezra Mendelsohn (ed.), *People of the City. Jews and the Urban Challenge* (New York and Oxford, 1999); Joachim Schlör, 'Siedlungsformen', in Elke-Vera Kotowski, Julius H. Schoeps and Hiltrud Wallenborn (eds.), *Juden in Europa. Ein Handbuch* (Darmstadt, 2002).

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Figure 5: Brandenburg Gate with the Wall in 1976 (*Die Mauer spricht*, Text und Bildzusammenstellung Rainer Hildebrandt, Verlag Haus am Checkpoint Charlie (Berlin, 1992))

1961, it was still possible – although more and more difficult after the foundation of two German states – to move between the sectors.[9]

Every year between 1949 and 13 August 1961, some 100,000–200,000 people left East Germany. In 1953, the year of the first and only uprising against Soviet power, they numbered 331,000 and most of them used the inner-Berlin border for their escape. In 1961, 155,402 people left before 13 August, of which 125,053 went via Berlin, and even after the crucial date 51,624 people left 'democratic' Germany. So it took quite a while until the border system really functioned, and it was never completely impermeable. The lowest exit numbers were recorded in 1983 when 11,343 people left, of whom only 228 were 'barrier breakers' or '*Sperrbrecher*' in Berlin. In 1985, 192 '*Sperrbrecher*' were counted, and in 1986 the lowest number of all: 160. Groups of mostly young people, including Rainer Hildebrandt who subsequently founded the museum 'The House at

[9] Billy Wilder in his wonderful movie 'One, Two, Three' recreated the atmosphere of these days and weeks shortly before 13 August in a very fine way: so well, indeed, that the movie was not shown in Germany before 1989 because Wilder seemed to make fun of the separation (which indeed was also an absurd situation but you were not supposed to say so).

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Figure 6: Winfried Hagendorf's idea of 'Berlin/Berlin' (1984). (*Die Mauer spricht* (Ideenwettbewerb 'Überwindung der Mauer durch Bemalung der Mauer'; Hagendorf won the 3rd prize in the competition))

Checkpoint Charlie', worked as 'Escape Helpers' or '*Fluchthelfer*', in the years shortly after the wall was built, digging tunnels underground or transporting people in cars or boats over the border. The story – a mixture of political action and adventure, combined with an element of romanticism – has been told in numerous books and movies, and is also the story we are told in the 'House at Checkpoint Charlie' museum.

Berlin is the place where two totalitarian systems have left their historical traces. What you see depends on where you stand. When the two Berlins, still separated, celebrated the 750th anniversary of the city in 1987, the Martin-Gropius-Bau hosted an exhibition, which could only have been called 'Berlin/Berlin' (Figure 6). The course of the exhibition ended for visitors with a short peek through a back door – where they looked at the wall. But visitors were also encouraged to look to their right, where they could see the ruins of the former Gestapo headquarters. The 'Topography of Terror' marks one of the central places of national-socialist terror in the capital of Germany. Another regime has disappeared, but tourists who want to learn about the history of National Socialism stand in front of the remnants of the wall, remnants which are getting thinner and thinner, full of holes.

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The city uses history in order to give itself an identity – to tourists and visitors, to its inhabitants, but also to other cities that are able to throw their 'icons' into the ring of cultural economy – skyscrapers, Eiffel Towers, Big Wheels or a Laguna. Strolling through Berlin, we can find examples of Frederick the Great's city, of the Berlin of the Enlightenment, of the upward-moving bourgeois Berlin of the 'foundation years' after 1871, of the arrogant Berlin of the Kaiser's period. But World War II and the two post-war periods dealt such heavy, devastating blows to all these buildings and the urban setting that some years ago a Berlin publishing house was able to publish a substantial lexicon of all the vanished buildings in Berlin.[10]

The wall, a rather weird artefact, has been more or less omnipresent in Berlin. But at the same time, in the everyday life of the two cities, or half cities, it was also more or less invisible. Both aspects, the omnipresence as well as the invisibility, will form the background for my argument. The materiality and material reality of something which was more than 43 kilometres long, a marathon wall, one could say, is as important for an understanding of this history as the way in which the two urban societies of 'Berlin, Berlin' managed to arrange themselves in a sort of 'culture of division' on both sides of the wall – so well indeed, that they did not notice the wall anymore.

Life in a culture of partition

Let us take a look back to 13 August 1961. 'Since early morning in the middle of Berlin the street surface has been torn open, pieces of asphalt and cobble stones are piled up to barricades, concrete stakes are rammed into the earth, barbed wire fences are drawn across the street. West and East Berliners stand aghast on each side of the sector's borders.'[11] In the Eastern part, 'Kampfgruppen', para-military groups and soldiers guard the building of the wall; in the West police try to hold back the enraged public. Erich Nieswandt, a reporter, sends his reports from the Brandenburg Gate, from Potsdamer Platz, from Bernauer Straße. East German border troops write a 'Journal of Actions' which contains in detail every act of resistance and what was called 'Western provocations'. '04.55. On the train stations Schönhauser Allee and Friedrichstraße travellers remain standing on the platform in western direction and discuss the closure of the border.' '05.05. An examination of the shooting heard at 04.05 has shown that the shots were fired by the city ranger who was chasing rabbits (the chase was stopped).' '05.10. Transport Police Friedrichstraße. Hundreds of people stand on the platform intending to go West.' '05.00. Brandenburg Gate. Three civilians sing the song "Brüder zur Sonne zur Freiheit" (a hymn of the Socialist – but explicitly not communist – Movement) on the western side, accompanied by shoutings like "shame on you".'

[10] Andreas Hoffmann, *Verschwundene Orte: Prominente Abrisse in Berlin* (Berlin, 1997).
[11] Documented on www.chronik-der-mauer.de.

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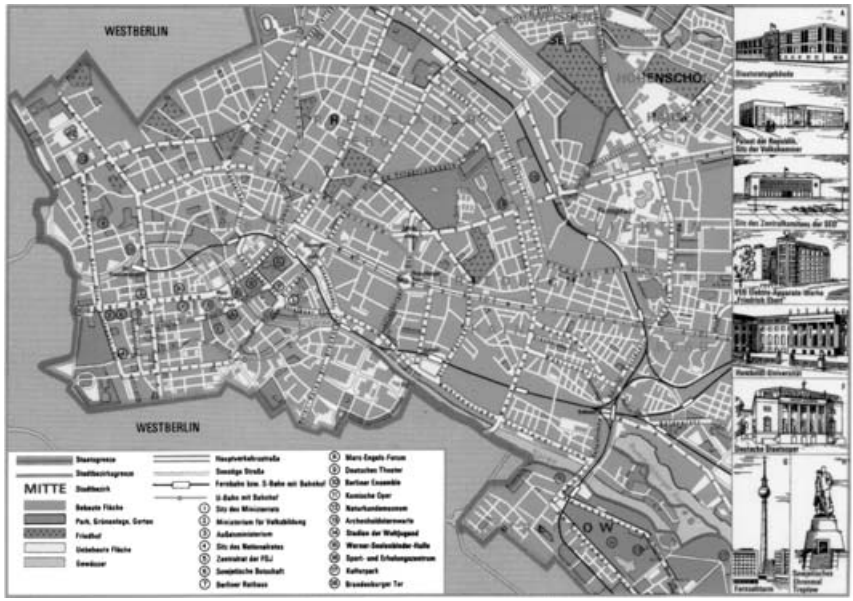

Figure 7: Berlin, capital of the German Democratic Republic (without West Berlin) (postcard, based on a city map of Berlin (East), 1970s)

In these days of August, 1961, it is not only a border wall that comes into being. It is also a new language. 'The blocking off of the Soviet Sector.' 'Unlawful and inhuman.' 'The Wall of a Concentration Camp.' But also: 'Steadiness and Calm.' And very soon: 'Wall of Shame', '*Schandmauer*.' Signs are put up by West Berlin's city administration that say: 'Dead End because of Wall of Shame.' At the same time, a new form of perception arises in which the wall becomes the central point of reference: this side and the other side; here and there; us and them. In the following years, the Communist Party (officially: Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, a result of the forced unification of the Communist and Social Democratic Parties in East Germany), the government of the GDR and the urban administration under their rule did their best not only to make the wall more and more secure, but also to keep inhabitants of the Soviet sector from approaching the wall. The whole inner organization of this city from the time of the Electors of Brandenburg had been determined by the great axis leading from the castle along the street 'Unter den Linden' through the Brandenburg Gate in the direction of the castle of Charlottenburg – and now the whole alignment had to be changed. New city maps had to be designed and printed on which the 'other' side of the wall consisted of a big empty space called 'Westberlin' (Figure 7), with the exception of the S-Bahn stations which, until 1984, belonged to East Berlin. East Berlin *had* inherited the old city centre, but Ulbricht's decision to tear down the partly ruined

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city castle – the very heart of Berlin – made this centre waste and empty. The axis had lost its meaning. East Berlin turned east, to the Alexanderplatz which got a new 'socialist' urban planning, to the Stalinallee (later and still Karl-Marx-Allee), to the wide streets in the direction of Frankfurt on the river Oder, to the traditional workers' districts in the north-east of the city and to the new high-rise housing projects in the East. And to Moscow.

The political connotation of wind directions has a long tradition in Berlin (no different from Paris or London). The East had been politically 'red' for a long time, and the West became a symbol for 'bourgeois', 'capitalist' or even 'nouveau riche' society since the beginning of the twentieth century.[12] The turn eastward brought Berlin nearer to Warsaw and the complicated brotherland of Poland. The wall that faced the East – 'Hinterlandmauer' in the language of the border troops – was turned into a white and clean screen one should not approach. In October, 1989, I drove along this 'Hinterlandmauer' with friends from East Berlin. I had chosen this way along Stralauer Straße from my Western map, but my friends were seeing this place for the first time in many years. It was just not part of their personal system of using their city; they turned their eyes away from the wall (behind which was the River Spree and 'alternative' Kreuzberg). But their personal system responded to the official policy of taking away all urban functions from the areas near the border and settled them elsewhere in the city.

And in the West? Here we can describe two processes that seem contradictory at first glance. The official politics of course never 'accepted' the 'Wall of Shame'. There were regular protests: wreaths were laid down at places where people had been shot. At several points in the city – Bernauer Straße, Potsdamer Platz, Brandenburger Tor – vantage points were put up from which you could look over the wall into the 'other' side (Figure 8). Vistors from West Germany and from all over the world were brought there to perform ritual protests. But behind this official facade, in its everyday life the Western part of the city turned its back to the wall just like the Eastern part did. Blocked roads do not make for a good location for business and industry. Broken bus connections make life uncomfortable. So, in the West, too, life turned away from the wall regions. This half-city looked, practically as well as metaphorically, to the West: to West Germany, from where all the money came to finance the island of West Berlin, to France, England and the USA, the 'protection powers', 'Schutzmächte', which guaranteed the city's existence – or so the 'Insulaner' hoped.[13]

Western maps showed the island of West Berlin upright and always in danger of being drowned in the Red Sea of Communism. And exactly into this island a stream of people flowed, people who made these useless

[12] This is discussed in Joachim Schlör, *Nights in the Big City. Paris, Berlin, London 1840–1930* (London, 1998).

[13] The term 'Insulaner' for the inhabitants of West Berlin was made popular by Günther Neumann and his cabaret of the same name. For those who understand German: 'Der Insulaner verliert die Ruhe nicht/Der Insulaner liebt keen Jetue nicht/Der Insulaner hofft unbeirrt/Daß seine Insel wieder 'n schönes Festland wird.'

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Figure 8: Sightseeing at the wall (Ackerstraße/Bernauer Straße, 1976) (postcard (photo-archive Hendrik G. Pastor, www.panorama-Berlin.de))

regions near the wall their new home: Turkish working migrants, students, young men who did not want to serve in the federal army (West Berlin, one of the most heavily militarized places in the Western world, was demilitarized for Germans; so the owner of a West Berlin identity card did not have to serve). With a 'Personalausweis' (the identity card for Federal Germany) one would be left alone in West Berlin, but could not travel to West Germany until the age of 29. It is obvious that some kind of folklore had to develop there, and that it had to consist of exactly all those strange rhythms of living. Kreuzberg, SO 36, became the home of all those who wanted to try 'alternative' life-styles, it became the meeting point for gallery owners and writers, the foundation place for the 'Alternative List', Berlin's more radical Green Party, and of the *tageszeitung*, a left-wing daily. It became the starting point for the squatting of empty houses. Investors cared little about houses and streets 'back there'.

And the wall? It became a work of art. If you lived in its shadow, if indeed you turned it into one of the walls of your own living quarters, protected by it from the forces of order and the interests of business, you could also paint it in bright colours.[14] What happened beyond, on the 'other' side, on Stralauer Straße for example, although it took place in the same city, might as well have happened in Mongolia. This form of

[14] Raimo Gareis, *Berliner Mauer: Die längste Leinwand der Welt* (Leichlingen, 1998).

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'Auseinandervereinigung' was analysed in the first number of a literary journal called *Freibeuter* (Dis-unification), published in 1979. One of the authors, Leonhard Wawrzyn, invented a Berlin tour with the title 'Berlin eastwest'. His text shows how far apart the two halves of the city had developed after only 18 years. Wawrzyn shows the city as 'A Place without closing hours, full of sights, topless bars and anecdotes.' In this tour, an imaginary bus goes from West to East, crossing 'into the GDR' at the wall.[15] There is still, the author says, some 'German–German life in this building'. The utopian fantasy Wawrzyn invents – in 1979! – very much resembles the real debates at the hearing in 1995. 'In the future', he writes, 'the place' – Friedrichstraße train station – will be put in mothballs, 'nothing changed'. Former Stasi officers guide tourists through the 'German Pompeii', actors play 'border control', and all the absurd movements – stand before the white line; do not cross; open your bags; buy Western wares for Western money in an Eastern 'Intershop'; show your left ear – will be performed. To question the reality of division in the year 1979, Wawrzyn writes:

> The division of Berlin takes place only in the evenings. The partition is re-invented every day and performed in a festive way in the evenings. Whoever wants to have it during daytime, has to enact the division by himself. In the evenings, East Berliners are sent home to watch TV and see the western part of the city which itself performs some sort of artificial life.[16]

In political life it was Berlin's task to keep the wall in the consciousness of Germans and the whole world. Delegations from Federal Germany complained at the United Nations' Commission for Human Rights. 'Never get used to it' was the commitment in Federal Germany. When asked about Berlin in 1963, every second West German spontaneously mentioned the wall. Annual anti-wall demonstrations gave high-ranking politicians the opportunity to speak out, and the 'Kuratorium Unteilbares Deutschland' distributed stickers showing an open Brandenburg Gate. In 1962 every third West German was in possession of these stickers, which were soon called 'needles of indulgence'. In the same way, the Kuratorium was dubbed *Unheilbar Deutschland*; whereas 'unteilbar' means 'indivisible', 'unheilbar' means 'incurable.' Re-Unification pfennigs were collected in schools, monuments dedicated to Berlin were erected in many cities, streets were given names like *Berliner Freiheit*, 'Berlin's Freedom'. In some cities mock 'walls' were built just to show how cities looked when divided. On 13 August an 'hour of silence' was held, flags were flown over public buildings and for Christmas West Germans put candles in their windows and Berliners brought Christmas trees to the wall.[17]

[15] Leonhard Wawrzyn, 'Berlin Ostwest', *Freibeuter* (Jan. 1979), 73.
[16] *Ibid.*, 78.
[17] Edgar Wolfrum, 'Die Mauer', in Francois and Schulze (eds.), *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte*, vol. I, 552–68.

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Figure 9: A wedding with the wall in the background (1970) (photo: Dieter Breitenborn)

But, again, the effect of these demonstrations became weaker over time. The government of East Germany celebrated the 'Anti-Fascist Wall of Protection' as a success, because it guaranteed some kind of peace between the blocks, and in the West the efforts of Willy Brandt's policy of détente made the wall seem smaller or at least easier to overcome. People could visit their relatives and friends, politicians were talking – but the two societies were also developing apart from each other at the same time. This disturbance in communication is beautifully illustrated with the photograph of a newly married couple presenting themselves on a balcony – with the wall and its equipment just behind them, like any other 'site' (Figure 9). At the same time, a totally different view of the situation is presented in the files of the 'Grenzkommando Mitte' (border command):

If a historian had the idea of reconstructing life in Berlin in the seventies and eighties only from this source, he would have to describe a world of continuous

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threat and tension, which could turn into an armed conflict at any moment. At a time when most Berliners, like the rest of the Western world had accepted the existence of the wall as a part of the status quo, the officers and soldiers of the border troops were kept in a constant state of alarm which remind us of the first days of the wall.[18]

Memory – and a way out?

We are still in a transition period. This period started with the 'fall' of the wall. On Saturday, 23 June 1990 – some months before the newly founded states of Brandenburg, Mecklenburg–Vorpommern, Sachsen, Sachsen–Anhalt and Thüringen joined the Federal Republic on 3 October – there was a public auction of pieces of the Berlin Wall in the Hotel Metropole Palace in Monte Carlo, headed by the bailiff Maitre Marie-Thérèse Escaut-Marquet, organized by the Galérie Parc Palace in Monaco and the LeLé Berlin Wall Ltd in Berlin. Two professors of the famous Berlin hospital 'Charité' wrote in the foreword to the auction's catalogue that the money gained in the auction should be transferred to the public health system in the (still existing) German Democratic Republic. They also asked some interesting questions:

> Is it correct to sell this symbol of the lack of freedom just like any showpiece? Not one of the people concerned, in the East or in the West, has forgotten the wall. . .It is still standing, visible for everybody, and supersedes the feeling of normality we long for. It has to go away, but at the same time it has to be kept. It shall remind us. It shall remind us of what happens when freedom, the most precious good of mankind, gets lost and is replaced by dogmas contemptuous of human life. After having given this a lot of thought, we decided it was fit and proper to sell the wall and to give the benefits to those who suffered from it.

Limex and LeLé are the names of the two firms that organized the sale. Limex is short for the State owned Foreign Trade Office of the GDR, AHB Limex-Bau Export–Import. This firm sold 360 segments of the wall – from Potsdamer Platz, dismantled on 13 November 1989; from the Brandenburg Gate, dismantled on 23 December 1989; from a Western quarter, 'Märkisches Viertel', taken away on 6 April 1990; and from Waldemarstraße and Luckauer Straße in Kreuzberg. The dismantling of these segments took place during the nights between 22 and 26 January 1990. These segments reflect the most imaginative documents of Berlin's 'Wall Art'. They are certified and, wherever possible, signed with the name of the artists. One segment is 360 centimetres high, 120 centimetres wide and 15 centimetres thick. The material is steel concrete of a high density. The paintings are from the years 1983–89. The back is white. The LeLé Berlin Wall Verkaufs- und Wirtschaftswerbung GmbH in Berlin has the exclusive rights to sell the segments worldwide.

[18] Polly Feversham and Leo Schmidt, *Die Berliner Mauer heute. Denkmalwert und Umgang* (Berlin, 1999), 105.

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Today the former owners of the lots on which the wall had been built are still struggling for a return of their property or for financial compensation. They had originally been disappropriated by the East German Communist government, but now the Federal government of united Germany claims the right of property. Meanwhile, the auctioned segments stand as artworks in front of museums or business headquarters all over the world. Berlin has been left with the 'Schneise'. The corridor that runs through the city has become the symbol for the consequences of the partition – the world 'after the wall'. The line is interrupted by places of memory, at Checkpoint Charlie, behind the Reichstag building or the Martin-Gropius-Bau and in Bernauer Straße. The rest is documented in a report of 800 pages, written by the Cottbus-based archaeologist Leo Schmidt.[19] The meticulous precision of the terms – more German words: *Grenzchiffren*, *Farbige Sperrgebietsmarkierungen*, *Blumenkübel-Sperren*, *Übersteigsicherungen*, *Schaltkästen für den Elektrozaun*, *Peitschenlampen*, *Steinpflaster*, *Vegetationsbrüche*, *Anlegestellen für Patrouillenboote*, *Fluß-Sperren* – is repeated in Leo Schmidt's report. Schmidt, it should be added, is the spokesman for a group of citizens who want to apply with UNESCO for the status of World Cultural Heritage for the remnants of the Berlin Wall.

The status of 'World Cultural Heritage' is awarded for an object of 'extraordinary and universal value', or for an 'extraordinary evidence of an extinct culture', or also for buildings which represent 'an important epoch of history'. The effect of these places should be 'immediate and vivid', and they should be connected to 'events, ideas or creeds of an extraordinary and worldwide meaning'. All these aspects do fit somehow – but somehow they do not fit at all. With this dilemma, the question of whether the wall should be awarded the precious title of 'World Cultural Heritage' became part of a more general debate about the principal quality of places of memory in Berlin. How much materiality does memory need? In what measure may this materiality be changed, presented or 'performed', in order to be understood?

Memory is complex but places tend to be simple. In a lecture given in Vienna, Anil Bhatti argued that a 'practice of heterogeneity' should be developed in order to fight against the tendency towards homogeneity found in places of memory that have been too clearly defined. Culture is a palimpsest, and can only be read as such. When historical places are under the process of musealization, there is always the danger that their meaning will be subordinated to some 'end of history' and that the debates that keep these places alive will be brought to a halt.[20] This is

[19] Axel Klausmeier and Leo Schmidt, *Mauerreste – Mauerspuren* (Bad Münstereifel, 2004).

[20] Martina Nußbaumer (Graz), Bericht über die Tagung 'Kulturerbe. Repräsentation, Fabrikation, Vermarktung' der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Kommission für Kulturwissenschaften und Theatergeschichte, in *Kooperation mit der österreichischen UNESCO-Kommission* vom 6.-8.11.2003 in Wien, H-Soz-Kult, 30 Nov. 2003.

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a very strong argument, and it has been used in connection with the planned memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe. Indeed, there is a certain tendency that something like a final keystone will be put – built – over the debate about Germany's Nazi past. But does the argument work when we look at the wall as a 'palimpsest'? What is there to discuss? Leo Schmitt, the archaeologist, said that during his research he learned a new way of looking at things. He calls it the 'Was-stimmt-hier-nicht?' ('What's wrong with this place?') look. For two years he has been documenting remnants of the wall, and especially at one place, near the former border station Heinrich-Heine-Straße, he discovered a new form of reading the city: 'Because at first sight the wall seemed to be totally gone, the second glance became more and more important. Suddenly he saw a lot.'[21]

A school for the eyes, a way to learn and to read your own city. Why not? At a second glance one finds so many places in the city that were marked by the traces of the partition, places that seem innocent 'at first glance'. For example, take the building of the (old) Academy of Arts near the Brandenburg Gate – where the young Dieter Beilig from West Berlin was shot by an officer of the East German border troops on 2 October 1971. This news, Mark Siemons comments, 'disrupts the whole area from its friendly cultivated harmlessness in which its has been bathing since 1989. Berlin has become a party location, a stage for the most varied esthetic experiences.' This observation is followed by the predictable discussion of the wall and its culture of division:

> But just the one monument which has dominated Berlin's presence for such a long time has become invisible. The Wall was not only a symbol of the division of the city, a division that is still there, under the unified surface, in manners of speech, ways of life, moral concepts. It was also the most massive expression of Berlin's economic isolation during the Cold War, isolation the city is still trying to overcome today. But there is not one place where you can get an impression of its function. The invisibility of the Wall is closely related to the Wall itself. Its function was exactly to make things invisible. It was far away from representing something, its only task was to negate the reality of the other side. The Real Existing Socialism could only exist as a closed system, only when it closed its own sphere off to *others*. This was the Wall's operating principle. It functioned as a protective wall not against attacks from the outside but against the threatening mixture, against the inability of the population behind the Wall to 'abstract' from the real reality. This was the reason for the euphoria and the speed when it came to tearing it down.[22]

The wall – and the system behind it – wanted too much. The population of half a city had to learn to forget that there was another half just on the other side – even at a time when it was possible to write or call and welcome TV programmes and visitors from this non-existent world. In most households, the old maps were still there, and they showed good old

[21] Petra Ahne: Der Mauerläufer, Berliner Zeitung, 19 Aug. 2003, S. 18.
[22] Mark Siemons, 'Grenzfall', in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 13 Aug. 2003, 31.

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Dresdner Straße running without any interruption from Kottbusser Tor via Heinrich-Heine-Straße to Oranienplatz.

A typical report, and one of many, appeared in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 8–9 November 2003:

> At the Wall, you can have experiences you would not dare to invent. There is the former border officer Reinhard Dühring, who is given explanations about the details of the Wall's construction by the young art historian Klasmeier. New friends of the Dühring family come to meet them: a painter from West Berlin who – at the time the Wall was built – had sworn to his son that one day the Wall would fall and that he would live to see it. Today he is married to a piano teacher from the eastern part of the city. She used to live exactly here where the soldier Dühring had been guarding the Wall. But she never went near it. 'You just did not go there.' In the meantime, she has crossed the former border to find a new life in the West. And now, the East–West couple and the former soldier and his wife are all standing on the line of the old border – where they would all have been shot only 14 years ago. No, they say, in the beginning they would not have dreamt of proposing the status of 'World Cultural Heritage' for the remnants of the Wall. 'We only got the idea', says the art historian, 'after we started to walk around in the physical material.'

Those physical traces: houses that still show painted edges, 15 centimetres wide, in a yellow colour: the 'Kolonnenweg'; some flag poles, forgotten barriers, wires, transformer stations – 'links to an archeology of the most recent past'. This is what it looks like in many places in the city. The wall itself has been taken away, but you can still identify the line on which it stood. Grass has grown over it; in some places streets have been erected over it – or even buildings, where property questions could be resolved. In any case, it does not really look like a 'World Cultural Heritage' site. So the reporter asks, as does the spokesperson for UNESCO, whose organization awards the status of a World Cultural Heritage, 'whether the important thing here is really the last three original stones – or rather the life that they were meant to prevent'. But these people do obviously define themselves and their lives and their feelings towards Berlin in relation to the wall. One of them was hoping for its fall, another did not go near it, and the third used to guard it – 'the Wall does not let people go'. And they do seem to need the pieces of memory that they pick up, collect and keep. In the threefold sense of the German word 'aufheben' they also 'elevate' it and surround it with meaning. The former soldier has to walk along the wall every now and then – to remember what he used to do as a young man and to know that it is over. These people, like many Berliners (and a great number of visitors as well) want to have a material wall as part of their urban experience. It is suggested that in 2006, for the duration of the World Championships in football, a new wall, 45.9 kilometres long, should be erected (for the price of 25 million Euro). Perhaps when it has finally turned into a genuine tourist attraction, the wall will no longer be an urban icon for Berlin.

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