



NO 'FINAL SOLUTION' TO THE MEMORY PROBLEM

Holocaust and war memorials in Germany

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This article addresses Berlin's waving field of pillars –the newly established Holocaust memorial for the murdered Jews of Europe– and Harburg's vanishing memorial against war, racism and violence. The notion of collected memory as opposed to collective memory is explored. How and if monuments can replace memory and memory can replace monuments is also discussed.

INTRODUCTION



Image 1: Model of Holocaust memorial. Eisenman's revised design (final), 1998

In the centre of Berlin, close to the Brandenburger Tor and Potsdamer platz, 2.711 metal grey pillars of various sizes take up land amounting to approximately four football fields in what from a distance appears like a matrix of tombstones or cornfield of pillars. The construction is surrounded neatly by trees here and there and encircled by four roads, one of them the newly established Hannah Arendt street, which is bordering the now mostly weed-overgrown area of Adolf Hitler's former bunker.

When getting close it becomes clear that the pillars are from about one foot tall to over the double length of an adult human being (from 0.2 to 4.7m), arranged in a structure of straight lines with a gradually lowered and uneven floor. As one enters the monument in between the pillars - most conveniently alone, or at least not beside another person, since there is only 95cm between each pillar- the noises of the city fade and the view towards the various buildings and cranes is blocked. The pillars toward the middle are the tallest. Here one is caught in a sense of labyrinth cradle or valley, and temporarily cut off the pulse of urbanity. As the Stern journalist Anja Lösel put it: "Anyone is here alone" (quoted in Weper, 2005).

This metal grey creation –a monumental monster and beauty- is *The Holocaust Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe*, now taking up some of the former bare stripped land or security zone also called *no man's land*, between what was East and West Berlin before 1989. The lucrative and historically over-determined area became free to build on after the wall and the barbed wire disappeared. In contrast to the strongly guarded *no man's land* in the wall-era, the same area is now memorial area and everybody's land, one could say. It is open 24 hours a day; there is no fence or security. It is for people to *use*. While I was visiting the site in July 2005, people used the lower stones as a bench or were sunbathing on top, having lunch, or sleeping. Youngsters were kissing, or hanging out with a shoulder against a pillar while 'watching for opportunities'. Kids were playing hide and seek, and others were just strolling slowly through. If one walks too fast, you risk bumping into other visitors.

One might think that graffiti would be a risk (chance?). Eisenman himself was not worried about the use, or graffiti vandalism/expressionism. The memorial was meant to be integral to the city, and graffiti is just an expression of the people, he explained (Quigley 2005). The pillars have, however, been given an anti-graffiti proof coating -and there is another story to this too, dryly summarized by Sarah Quigley: "In a stranger-than-fiction twist, the firm supplying the proofing was Degussa -co-owner of the company that made the Zyklon B gas used in concentration camps. By way of atonement, the company donated their product for free" (Quigley, 2005).

Below this monument is a new Holocaust information center. While this mostly darkened basement exhibition displays concise and shocking information on death factories and intimate family biographies, the Holocaust memorial communicates on quite another level. It is much more confusing, maybe enrichingly confusing, in its communicative set-up. I will in this article contrast this Berlin 'monument over monuments' with a (former) counter-monument against "war, racism and violence" in Harburg, outside Hamburg. My overall purpose is to address complicated monumental and interactive takes on memories of war. The rising occupation with 'memory' (Maier, 1986, Huyssen, 1986, 2001, Young, 1993 and 2000), here maybe Holocaust memory in particular (Finkelstein, 2003, Huyssen, 2001) is, by nature, an occupation with its representation, since to evoke memory, whether grounded in lived experience or mediated/passed on, in a public and inevitably communicative context, is to represent it. Andreas Huyssen (2001) argues that a memory discourse of a new kind emerged in the aftermath of decolonization and the rise of new social movements and their search for alternative revisionist histories. I would add that the occupation with memory could also be motivated by a search for re-capturing histories, such as old national, nostalgic imaginations, as a consequence of various forms of new (dis)order. Or could it be a search for some clarity? The conflicts in Israel-Palestine, Northern Ireland, the Balkans and Turkey all involve an entangled and explosive mixture of ethnic, national, religious and political issues, connected with heated debates on the interpretations of history [1].

The Holocaust memorial in Berlin was designed by Peter Eisenman, an American polish-born architect. Eisenman and the artist Richard Serra conceived the initial idea and rough design in collaboration. When the committee showed interest in the proposal, but wanted revisions, Serra left and Eisenman adapted.

The memorial was opened in May 2005 after over 15 years of turbulent debate. Over this period, Berlin's *cityscape* (Appadurai, 1996) has undergone radical change, not to forget the city's tumultuous past. From a passing bird's point of view, over the last decade it has been a place where to watch out for the cranes and new buildings mushrooming in the lower air space, one could say. Ironically, the city benefits from an unwanted cultural heritage as an urban and tourist-attractive asset [2]. At the time when Berlin became Germany's capital again, the white sheet was removed from the restored Reichstag revealing a transparent dome on top. A symbol of the new enlightened Germany? Now a striking memorial is laid out in stone pillars.

It all began 17 years ago with a local citizen initiative by the German TV-journalist Lea Rosh, and a public proposal in January 1989, which was signed by Willy Brandt, Günter Grass and many other well-known public

figures. The group called for a central memorial in Germany for the victims of the genocide. The proposal came at a time when Germany's rework of its past had found a more explicit form in the decades after years of postwar silence or repression. In fact, a so-called *historikerstreit* raged briefly in the 1980s (Mayer, 1988) where academic debates around history and contemporary German identity gained some publicity. How could Germany cope with a difficult past that in the postwar years had been silenced? One of the participants was Jürgen Habermas, one of Germany's well-known philosophers. Among others he pledged for Germany's responsibility to continuously deal and dialogue with its past.

Over the years before the final design for the Holocaust memorial was decided, the site itself, as well as the particular form of communication and representation, ignited heated debate, and slips of many tongues poured into newspapers. One of the most striking came from James E. Young, a Jewish-American researcher, author of two cutting-edge books on memory I use here and member of the committee set up to evaluate the incoming design proposals who critically labeled the idea of a grand memorial "the final solution" to the German memory problem (Høg Hansen, 1998 and Young, 2000:191). He later reworked his satiricism in milder terms and pointed out that the debate, which is not over, is a very useful memorial itself (in Young, 2000). Over the years, many other comments poured out: Helmut Kohl moaned about the tombstone-like character of the monument. Gerhard Schröder remarked that he would like a place to where one would like to come. The writer Martin Walzer proclaimed in a public speech that the *cement*-ation of the city centre was a nightmarish monumentalization of shame (my translation, from Weper, 2005).

My purpose here is to briefly present three interrelated points: a vision of *collected* memory, instead of *collective* memory, as partly represented in Eisenman's design; a warning against the 'monumentality' and a singular-type form of communication of certain memorials; and a juxtaposition in the form of an alternative-type memorial or counter-memorial, in Harburg, near Hamburg.

But first, what is a *memorial* exactly? I pursue a view on memorials as physical *monuments* or installations established as, for example, sites for the memory of an era, an event, or a long gone figure or group of people. James E. Young (1993) also classifies *memorial events*, belonging to the genre of *memorials*, such as particular practices or rituals enacted and reenacted. The Holocaust Remembrance Day in Israel is one of these [3]. In a common sense understanding, some refer to *monuments* as *cherishing* a former king or a victory in a war, for example, while *memorials* are for the *mourning* of lost people or tragic events. However, if we place all these understandings in one category, we could ask:

hypothetically, does this point toward *preservative* practices and a rather old-fashioned notion of the *collective* character of memory?

At a time when debates around the Holocaust have regained momentum, the term 'the Holocaust industry' has emerged and the Holocaust places itself as the center for genocidal studies (Huyssen, 2001), Holocaust-related memorials become contested sites –sites of heated, antagonistic and agonistic interpretation- where rites or practices around commemoration fuse with art, politics and cultural and historical representation, sometimes in a very uneasy dance. This raises questions regarding *communication* for the *preservation* or *development* of... whose memories? What memories? For whom? And so forth.

Memorial sites and practices can provide ground for the articulation of what is hard to articulate, or for explorations, maybe the healing of or coping with feelings in a public and social context around issues that concern certain group collectives or identities. Thus, what is the intriguing potential or danger of the Berlin Holocaust memorial? Artistic 'communication' in the public sphere on a never-resting topic?



Image
2:

COLLECTED VS. COLLECTIVE MEMORIES

Eisenman's design is at least definitely confusing. Young (2000) stresses its *unheimlichkeit*, its anti-redemptory design, and the pillars' humane proportions. I would add that the amount of pillars, however, contributes to the super-sizing and monumentalization. On the other hand, the design avoids 'teaching'. There are no texts or photographic images. We are not guided, nor told. We do not even know where to enter or exit. There is a sense of motion involved.

Visiting the memorial made me think again of memory as *processor*, as Portelli has put it (1991). Intuitively, we might also embark on a vision of memory as a *freezer*, where we preserve and store, although well-knowing that the imagined character of memory and the evolvment of life in a present inevitably make us forget as well as cast new and older eyes on the past gone. Memory holds on, as well as configures, the past, and reconfigures it, we could say, borrowing from Paul Ricoeur (1983).

In the light of these brief ponderings and conceptualizations it can be summed up by Peter Eisenman, the architect and creator, who says that with his memorial he wants to show "there is no goal, no path, or no direction home to or away from memory" (my translation after Weper, 2005). This might be seen as a rather unsettling view on memory?

As mentioned earlier, Germany had a brief *historikerstreit* in the 1980s on how to talk about, represent, and teach the Holocaust, and how that related to contemporary German identity. One of the key issues of that debate and the debates over memory that followed is how to represent the un-representable: an in-depth examination of the limits of representation (Friedlander, 1991) as well as a revision of the past. Israel had its so-called post-Zionism debates in the 1990s [4], South Africa established truth commissions. Issues of so-called post-conflict reconciliation are prominent in the Balkans too, mirrored in new civil society projects (see for example Johansson, 2005) which come to work as enacted memorials. The exploration of memory in conflict and post-conflict zones is related to a larger phenomenon of medialisation of conflict, where its mediation is a form of globalization that comes to us repetitively rather than realized by travel, still for a few (Tomlinson, 1999), and where constant exposure turns the outrageous into everyday (Cohen, 2003).

Returning to the walk down the valley of the metal grey cornfield in central Berlin, memory becomes a more personal, diffuse and not given matter. Each pillar is of varied size. It somehow now appears like a

collection. While we share points of reference and can relate to representations before us with people within a shared community or within small collectives of families, partner, friends, one could follow Young and say that we do not in general share memory. Memory can be said to be bound to be in-complete and collected, although nations are based on the collectivization and imagination of what was, and is, passed on (Anderson, 1991). The Holocaust memorial aims to mirror the in-completeness and the collected.

MONUMENTS ERASING MEMORY?

We could say that our typical monumental figure, our friend the silly chivalric king mentioned before, represents a singular-meaning image of the figure rather than igniting memory or thinking. The figure might *replace* a dynamic memory with a static, frozen representation? It may become a simple illustration of a gone factuality that we can refer to, instead of a problematization of the past and an artistic representation that triggers memory and history debate through its interpretive potential?

Eisenman's design is far more than an illustration, but it can be argued that at the same time it establishes this monumentality and finality of a Holocaust representation. It attempts to digest many aspects of the war in one memorial and various forms of group-guilt: Germans', humankind's, 'modernity's' (keeping in mind that the bureaucratic processes of modernity also made Holocaust in its specific industrial form possible, according to Bauman, 1991). If we elaborate on traditional communication studies questions, like *from whom, what, to whom, in which context, with what effect*, it becomes difficult to fully understand many memorials, and certainly the Holocaust memorial. Berlin has, as mentioned, a range of other memorials dedicated to aspects of, and particular people, during the Holocaust [5]. Will a grand memorial like this new one prevent other memorials in Berlin from emerging? Is the 'case closed' or opened? Has the Holocaust industry overrepresented itself compared to the many other genocides?

MEMORY REPLACING THE MONUMENT

Friedlander (1992) makes a distinction between *common* and *deep* memory, something that is also taken up by James E. Young (2000) in his reading of Art Spiegelman's original oral history cartoon of the Holocaust, *Maus* (the correct term today may be 'graphic novel'), where a son listens to the father's story of the concentration camps. The son manages to sort some events out, to see them before him like a puzzle, the father's tales slowly creating some kind of ordered, emplotted, narrative. This is memory that can be articulated and put into some order, *common*

memory, and the image stays in mind simplified: the Germans are cats; the Jews are mice. But there are also pieces of the puzzle left out, missing, forgotten, repressed, impossible to comprehend or 'speak out', *deep memory*. His mother's death in the camp is among those. The two cases discussed in this article, along with many other artistic representations of history and memory, play with this 'border' between common and deep memory -what can be articulated, and what is just enigmatic or very difficult to represent.



*Image
3: The*

Harburg memorial after its seventh lowering, 1992

Holocaust is part of a broader issue of racism and violence. The genocide is partly a consequence of racism in an extreme form. In the Hamburg-suburb of Harburg, a rather different vision of a memorial was launched in 1986 –Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz's *Monument against Fascism, War and Violence*. While the Eisenman memorial invites to interaction in the form of motion, this also evokes interaction in another sense.

The memorial is not there any more, not because it was taken down, but

because it was designed as a progressively vanishing memorial, like a deteriorating physique or 'body' of something Memory itself? A 20-meter tall rectangular pillar was established in the middle of a suburban town mall. People were invited to cover it with comments and thoughts. Once covered with memorial graffiti on the four surface areas of the pillar a human being could reach, it was lowered into the ground. In this way, it was lowered step-by-step, but in a pace the public determined. Public interaction in terms of writing directed the 'life' of the memorial. When it was lowered new space to write on became available. New thoughts could be marked in stone, yet a disappearing stone or 'body'. At some point it is gone, only the top horizontal part of the pillar is left as trace, and it leaves behind only the rememberer, as Young notes (2000) –left with a responsibility to keep thinking and take action as a citizen. The faster the people annotate the memorial, the faster it will be gone. The last lowering of the monument into the chamber as deep as it was tall in 1986 took place in 1993. Lewis Mumford reminds us that “stone gives a false sense of continuity” (in Young, 2003). Here 'monumentality' has been turned against itself, and the memorial may trigger thoughts regarding our obligations as citizens and our forgetfulness.

Some of us might be lucky not to have war in front of our feet right now, but it might return or arise someday, if we are not careful.

*Image
4: The*



Harburg memorial vanished, 1993

For other photos of the Berlin Memorial see http://www.war-memorial.net/mem_det.asp?ID=104

For photos of the Harburg memorial see e.g. <http://www.rrz.uni-hamburg.de/rz3a035/antifascist.html>

[1] The nature of memory is its imaginative character, its inevitable fleetingness or gone-ness. Huyssen notes however (inspired by Appadurai, 1996), that the distinction “allows us to distinguish between memories that are grounded in lived experience from memories pillaged from the archive”.

[2] The memory turn or debate that can be detected in cultural studies (see for example André Jansson, 2005) is linked to discussions of cultural heritage and the use of a past to revitalize a region, city or culture in a present. See Oscar Hemer (ed.) *A Future for the Past*, 2004 and O. Hemer and K. Gansing (eds.) *Urban Assets*, 2005, both SIDA and Urban Development Division, Stockholm.

[3] A photo from an Israeli highway on the Holocaust Remembrance Day (in Young, 1993) illustrates how a human, temporary and collective architecture and mindset are created through memorial events.

[4] See for example the anthology *The Israel/Palestine Question. Rewriting Histories* by Ilan Pappé (ed.), 1999 or Lawrence Silberstein's *Postzionism debates*, 2001.

[5] Many other memorials in Berlin target more specific groups or subject matters relating to the Nazi era. There is a memorial on the book burnings, one for the government officers killed by the Nazis, and so forth. In 1999, a museum and a memorial garden specifically concerned with the history of Jews in relation to Berlin opened, designed by Daniel Libeskind (who also designed the newly opened Jewish museum in Copenhagen).

Image credits

1. In Young, 2000
2. photo by author
3. and 4. In Young, 2000. Credited Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz.

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