SIGNS OF TRAUMA ON THE BUILDINGS OF BERLIN: REMINDING OR RE-TRAUMATIZING BERLINERS?

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[Image depicts the side of an occupied apartment building in Prenzlauer Berg, Berlin, Germany. Building has visible signs of artillery fire and shrapnel.]

On the side of an apartment building in Berlin's Prenzlauer Berg neighborhood birds fly in and out of nests they have created out of holes left by World War II shrapnel. An open window lets the voices of children escape outside. Prenzlauer Berg is a posh neighborhood that is rapidly developing, yet the physical damage of years of war and partitions remain. While the city of Berlin has moved forward, 75 years after World War II and almost 30 years after the Berlin Wall fell physical reminders of the conflicts remain. Some Berliners live in buildings still marred with scars from shrapnel and bombs during the war. These buildings, along with those

constructed by the German Democratic Republic during the partition of Berlin, are simultaneously reminders and historical artifacts from periods of terror in Berlin.

Trauma is defined both as an injury to living tissue by some extrinsic factor and as a psychological or behavioral state that results from severe mental or emotional stress. Physical trauma manifests through scars and bruises just as psychological trauma manifests through PTSD. In Berlin, the physical and psychological intersect through buildings marred by artillery from Germany's worst period. The question that I wish to address is when should the line be drawn between preservation of history or memorialization and the need for Berlin to move forward? As Berlin continues to grow and German society is increasingly distanced from World War II, the city faces the choice to preserve or rebuild. These buildings are physical reminders of the Holocaust and World War II whose events have instilled trauma into the German collective memory. These signs of trauma are also an important reminder of how evil encroached into every aspect of life in Berlin and how quickly it could happen again. In Berlin, one is often "left trying to navigate between the Scylla of cold historical fact and the Charybdis of moody evocation,"[1] caught between two unattractive options. However, these signs of a traumatic past should be preserved when at all possible, as the historical and emotional value of these buildings is irreplaceable. Negating instances when the structural integrity of the a building is threatened, preservation should always be the goal. Concerns of re-traumatizing an already traumatized population, while warranted, ignore the need to remember. With physical signs of the Holocaust and World War II erased, the history of this period is more easily distorted. With far-right

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[1] John Czaplicka, "History, Aesthetics, and Contemporary Commemorative Practice in Berlin," *New German Critique*, no. 65 (1995): 155–87, https://doi.org/10.2307/488540, 156.

movements grow these buildings are immeasurably important as they physically speak against fascism, xenophobia, and anti-semitism from the past to the present.

The scholarly debate centers around the value of authentic structures for remembrance versus the need to move forward, both architecturally and emotionally. Scholars argue that the German memorials that have been the most successful in terms of capturing the emotions of the events they commemorate have been memorials that are relatively realistic renditions of the original space.[2] When creating memorials out of new resources, the integrity and authenticity of the site is diminished. Natural memorials, or those that sprung out ruins, that are curated by mourners are often the most powerful symbols. Thus, by preserving shrapnel holes in buildings in Berlin, natural memorials are created that hold more value than a reconstructed rendition could. John Czaplicka, a European Studies professor at Harvard University, would argue that these spaces should be preserved as there is no substitute for physical evidence of what humanity is capable of. Czaplicka would find remnants of bombs in apartment buildings more powerful and capable of encapsulating the emotions of Germans than state commissioned monuments.

The concern remains that German citizens' collective identity is already weighed down by the trauma of World War II and the following events. Preserving scars from this trauma may simply reinforce what is already felt throughout Berlin. Bernhard Giesen writes about how post memory of World War II and the Holocaust have created a collective German identity formed from trauma. Giesen writes that "memory marks the center of identity."[3] Giesen argues that memory is the basis for how a country develops a collective identity. Just as the heroics of US soldiers have been internalized into a culture of patriotic "winners," the trauma of the horrific

[2] Czaplicka, 156.
[3] Bernhard Giesen and S. N. Eisenstadt, *Triumph and Trauma* (London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2015), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/davidson/detail.action?docID=4186286, 103.

actions of Germany in the past has been internalized into German citizens, many of whom are 2 generations removed from those events. The Holocaust traumatized German society through "not only from ruin and rape, death and defeat, but also from the sudden loss of self-respect and moral integrity."[4] After World War II, the individual traumas of rape, death, and dehumanization and the collective trauma of guilt were internalized by German citizens. This manifests into an identity that suppresses any signs of nationalism, even in times of joy and national success. The traumatized and defeated German identity is the source of arguments in favor of moving forward, past the Holocaust.

Marred buildings and the remainders of war may reinforce the trauma that is already felt by German citizens. Giesen would argue that the trauma of the Holocaust and World War II is already ingrained in German society. Therefore, if the trauma is permanently ingrained in the collective memory of germans, there is no added value in the preservation of scarred buildings. As memorials and stumbling stones can be seen throughout Berlin, there is merit to the argument that Berliner's are actively remembering their city's past. Berliners may be capable of continuing to do so without these buildings. From this perspective, remembrance does not necessitate preserving all signs of trauma. As Berlin has heavily commemorated this period of the city's history, physical scars on the city's architecture may not provide any more value.

However, the value of natural memorials can be seen in the case of the Church of Our Lady in Dresden[5], a lutheran church destroyed by allied bombings during World War II. The city of Dresden has long engaged in a reframing of it's history through "destruction, construction,

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[4] Giesen, 154.

[5] Jason James, "Undoing Trauma: Reconstructing the Church of Our Lady in Dresden," *Ethos* 34, no. 2 (2006): 244–72.

and reconstruction that has almost entirely excluded the memory of the Holocaust."[6] Dresden became the site of the radical clearing of whole streets of salvageable historical ruins, leaving behind empty space and erasing parts of the city's history. This erasure can be seen in the the Church of Our Lady in Dresden, or Frauenkirche. After Frauenkirche was bombed, only a statue of Luther remained. This was seen as a sign by many and was formed into a natural memorial by the citizens of Dresden. The church became a symbol of humanity's capability to be truly evil. However, in the early 2000's the church was rebuilt in the image of the original design, making use of new bricks in the style of the original structure and old, charred bricks from the Church's destruction. Although parts of the church's reconstruction were used in the rebuild, forty years of the Church of Our Lady's history was erased. The charred bricks were placed in the rebuild to commemorate the victimization of German citizens during World War II and the following German Democratic Republic. Proponents of the project argued that restoring the church was necessary to recreate the iconic skyline of Dresden. Citizens felt that something was missing; their history had been destroyed by war. Additionally, during the era of the GDR, rebuilding the church was favored over other reconstruction projects, such as the historic synagogue. The GDR believed that rebuilding a memorial that identified "only one particular group" as victims of Nazism and "alluded to the culpability of Dresden residents"[7] would have severely undermined this official portrayal of German suffering. However, James argues that this reconstruction was not restoring a part of Dresden's history, but rather erasing it. The part of the church's history as a living memorial is no longer visible, as if it never happened. The reconstructed church will never be able to evoke loss as vividly as the ruins of the church did. Natural memorials like the

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[6] Susanne Vees-Gulani, "The Politics of New Beginnings," n.d., 24.
[7] Vees Gulani, 33.

Church of Our Lady prior to reconstruction are symbolic and conceptual and cannot be filled, serving as a permanent reminder of the "absolute void"[8] created by the Holocaust. This void can't be filled or truly ever repaired as the crimes committed are too severe for Germany to ever truly be repaired. These memorials are both theoretical and physical; the conceptual nature of the memorial is clear and can be seen.

While the line between reinforcing trauma, physical need for repair, and desire to never forget is narrow, it can be best walked through authentic memorial spaces that preserve the integrity of the original space. Negating cases where the structural integrity of a building or space is impeded by the preservation of signs of trauma, these markers should be preserved. The power of natural memorials cannot be matched by those constructed by the state and their destructions aids in the reconstruction of the historical narrative. Christian Boltanski's *Missing House* structure in Berlin exemplifies the power of simplistic and original memorial structures. This art piece was created when Boltanski passed by a building that had been destroyed by an Allied Forces bomb in 1945. Boltanski set out to tell the story of the German civilians and German-Jewish civilians who lived in the building before. The building is set between two apartment buildings that are occupied today, located in the bustling neighborhood of Kollwitzkiez on the eastern side of Berlin.

The Missing House compels the curiosity and postmemory[9] of passersby and the inhabitants of the surrounding apartments as they view a gaping hole where an apartment

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[8]Jessica Marino, "Cultural Memory and the Traumatic Past: Examining the Voids in Contemporary German and Uruguayan Literature, Museums, and Film," *Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository*, August 27, 2018, https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/5580, 104.

[9] Post memory describes how the memories of the "generation after" compares to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before. This is essentially the act of remembering events that were not experienced personally.

building once stood.[10] As a natural memorial, the *Missing House* is unexpected, causing viewers to truly *think* about what they are experiencing.The absence created in Boltanski's piece is a physical representation of the destruction that occurred all throughout the city during World War II. Boltanski asks observers to consider what happened to each family that once lived there. Just as the lives of those that occupied the building can never be truly replaced or repaired, the building cannot be repaired. The message that this memorial and many other natural memorials portray is that what was lost can never be recovered. Pretending that Berlin and the world can recover from the atrocities of World War II and the Holocaust is naive and incorrect. Through preservation of such sites, this message is relayed to Berliners and tourists everyday.

Stumbling upon a memorial is expected in Berlin, often generating a reaction of sadness but very rarely one of empathy. However, stumbling upon a building with visible scars compels viewers to place themselves in the building. Especially for residents, it is impossible to step into the space without considering what occurred in the space years before. If these scars are erased, this conversation with the past will disappear and empathy in the present. This is evident in the US, as all signs of the horrors of slavery and lynchings have been erased from the American South. Today, Americans use historic plantations as wedding venues and for photoshoots, with little regard of the horrors that occured in the spaces they inhabit. Erasure of signs of trauma and violence soothes consciences and allows people to ignore the past in the spaces they inhabit in the present.

Erasure of trauma can be seen as a mechanism to appease "the desire for an unburdened identity."[11] Erasing evidence of the real effects that World War II and the Holocaust had on the

[10] Pierre Nora, "Postmemory and Art in the Urban Space," n.d., 7.
[11] James, "Undoing Trauma." 245.

daily lives of Germans also has the potential to feed into a dangerous narrative. German Nationalists today have reduced the Holocaust to simply the work of a *few* "mentally disturbed" people.[12] Allowing the only evidence and conversation about the war to revolve around nazism and concentration camps ignores how persistent and encroaching the Nazi regime was and the role of all German citizens in its rise to power. This narratives allows Germans who were not nazis to escape any responsibility and blame for the Holocaust and World War II. As political parties like the Alternative for Germany grow in popular support, there is a real danger that Germans will move away from the traditional "memory culture."[13] AfD continues to call for an end to apologizing about the past, as they are finding support from Germans who seek to escape the sometimes overwhelming historical responsibility."[14]

Memory culture requires Germans to place themselves in the uncomfortable position of accepting what their country did in the past in order to prevent it from occurring in the future. Memory culture surrounding the Holocaust persists in Germany because of the country's commitment to preserving concentration camps. While this practice works to ensure that German citizens remember the Holocaust, it does not reinforce the idea that all Germans played a role in the rise of the Nazi Party. Concentration camps are evidence of Nazi guilt for the Holocaust, but scars on buildings reflect the culpability of all Germans. Artist's preservation of visual evidence of the effects of the war on all aspects of life in Berlin, citizens are reminded of the responsibility of the individual to act against hate, as hate effects all. It is important to protect evidence of collective culpability in to the future to remind us all of our collective responsibility to protect

[12] Giesen, 156.
[13] Jason Stanley, "Opinion | Germany's Nazi Past Is Still Present," *The New York Times*, September 20, 2018, sec. Opinion, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/10/opinion/germanys-nazi-past-is-still-present.html.
[14] Kate Connolly, "Bernhard Schlink: Being German Is a Huge Burden," *The Guardian*, September 16, 2012, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/sep/16/bernhard-schlink-germany-burden-euro-crisis.

others. The danger lies that if this collective culpability for genocide from the past is forgotten, individuals will not be compelled to act against hate in the future. For this reason, any reminders of the shared consequences of hate that reinforce the collective responsibility to act should be preserved. For a future of accurate remembrance and understanding of individual responsibility, the marred buildings of Berlin should be preserved.

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