

**PALIMPSESTADT – THE CITY OF LAYERS**

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**[a] PREAMBLE: THE ATRIUM AND ITS WALLS**

I'm staring at the worn out walls in the empty hallway of an old Nineteenth Century tenement house in former East Berlin. On the darkened surface, I still can see the traces of the former polish, a few spots of turquoise paint beneath a dark, dusty uniformity. Layers upon layers of paint, colours upon colours, scraped and consumed by the passing of time. And underneath the paint, I can see clefts and cracks, and deep holes carved by grenades splinters in the years of war. I daydream about the tragedies of history that took place in here. Stories of life and death, of poverty and wealth, of betrayal and intimacy: all have remained imprinted on these walls, each layer witnessing the passing of time, each layer disclosing a vertiginous realm of innocent and tainted memories. On the walls of this empty room, the entire history of an insane Nineteenth Century has been written and re-written, layer upon layer.

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**[b] I. THE MAGIC PAD, THE PSYCHE AND THE CITY**

According to its Greek etymology, the term "palimpsest" refers to papyrus or parchments whose ink was scraped off and written on again, so that the earlier writing remained incompletely erased and still visible beneath their surface. An image that recalls Freud's metaphor of the *mystic writing pad* [1], the children's writing tablet from which notes could be magically removed by simply lifting a sheet of semi-transparent paper that covered a block of dark wax beneath it. We used to play with such tablets in our childhood, only ours were made of plastic. Anyway, the concept of palimpsest has been often used in literature and psychology in order to describe the ghost-image of what once was.

Freud was the first who used the metaphor of the roman palimpsest to describe the structure of the human unconscious in "Civilization and Its Discontents [2]." He recognized a similarity between the layered construction of cities, made of gradual (or traumatic) additions and erasures, and the human psyche: "Suppose that Rome is not a human habitation but a psychological entity with a similarly long and copious past - an entity, that is to say, in which nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one...". In this passage, he associates the layered construction of Rome through history with the behavior of the human brain, which floats amidst layers of memories and amnesia.

[b] Image of a palimpsest by Kirsty Hall



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**[c] II. PALIMPSESTADT: THE CITY OF LAYERS** In its short essay "The City as Palimpsest" [3], theorist Muñoz Millanes investigates the role of memory in the aesthetic of the city through the use of literary suggestions and poetic images; he describes the city as a text, written and rewritten - that is, a palimpsest. In his view, the city is "an immense archaeological deposit in whose vertical cuts scenes come to light where, in a certain way, lives and events already extinguished still survive", thus recalling the words of Benjamin [4]: "each street is a vertiginous experience".

According to Millanes, the city is "a palimpsest where traces of heterogeneous times accumulate", and the architecture of the city "comes to be the testimony *par excellence* of daily life, because in its fixity the vicissitudes of humankind are registered throughout time". The architecture of the city is an open-air archive of collective and personal memories, as Aldo Rossi poetically argued in the introduction of its "The Architecture of the city" [5]: "Architecture, attesting to the tastes and attitudes of generations, to public events and private tragedies, to new and old facts, is the fixed stage for human events [...] One need only look at the layers of the city that archaeologists show us; they appear as a primordial and eternal fabric of life, an immutable pattern. Anyone who remembers European cities after the bombing of the last war retains an image of disembowelled houses where, amid the rubble, fragments of familiar places remained standing, with their colours of faded wallpaper, laundry hanging suspended in the air, barking dogs - the untidy intimacy of places. And always we could see the house of our childhood, strangely aged, present in the flux of the city."

Images of unparalleled time depth and unattainable intensity are still visible in the urban fabrics of great cities like Rome. As the permanence of the past in the present form of the city may manifest itself through sharp contrasts and a disorienting chaos, a strong cultural maturity is essential to reconcile these contrasts as parts of a harmonious picture. Fellini and Pasolini have celebrated the Myth, the glories and miseries of post-war Rome by setting scenes of their films in the midst of the massive ruins of the old roman aqueducts, surrounded by the more prosaic, brutalist housing projects of post-war reconstruction.

Classical Rome, medieval Rome, renaissance Rome, baroque Rome, Eighteenth-Century Rome, post-unification Rome, Fascist Rome, and reconstruction-Rome: as John Seabrook [6] argues, "each successive Rome is built on top of previous Romes. More than two thousand years of history is squashed into dozens of feet of dense rubble".

**[d] III. BERLIN, ARCHIVE OF MEMORIES?**

As Andreas Huyssen [7] argued, "Berlin's city text has been frantically written, erased, and rewritten throughout that (the Nineteenth) violent century, and its legibility relies as much on visible markers of built space as on images and memories repressed and ruptured by traumatic events." Whenever spaces are shuffled, rebuilt, or remodelled, ghostly shadows remain, much like in the haunted city suggested in Brian Ladd's "The Ghosts of Berlin [8]".

Thus, Berlin has long been considered the City of Layers *par excellence* - the open air archive of memories of an atrocious Nineteenth Century; a labyrinthine landscape through which one can navigate; an imaginative environment where the before and the after come across one another in a chaotic overlapping.

The *Berliner Innenstadt* is a paradigm of this vertiginous chaos; a composite of abandoned ruins and new architectural layers; of ghostly shadows of a past waiting to be deciphered, and obvious signs of modernity: walking along the vast area west of Alexanderplatz - an immense extension of concrete surrounding the television Tower - the wanderer can still see, before the monotonous background of massive housing blocks of the socialist era, the gothic spires of the ancient Marienkirche; farther, on the Spree Island, the ionic capitals of Schinkel's neo-classicist Altes Museum rival with the ruins and debris of steel and glass of the Palast der Republik, former sit of the Volkskammer (the GDR Parliament), and now undergoing one of the most controversial demolitions in the history of Berlin.

**[e] IV. ORIGINAL SIN. AND RETALIATION**

From its unveiling in 1976 on, the Palast der Republik not only embodied the authority of the communist regime - it also served as the main venue of popular life and culture in the GDR. With its futuristic concert hall - whose 5000 seats, thanks to a technologically advanced pneumatic system, could be lifted mechanically as to provide free space for dancing night events; with the big theatres, the exhibitions rooms, the bowling alley, the disco club for the



interior of the Palast der Republik during the exhibition 'Fraktale IV - Der Tod', by Martin Kunze

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[1] From Freud's brief essay: "A Note Upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad'", in *General Psychological Theory*, Chapter XIII, 1925.  
 [2] Written in 1929, and first published in German in 1930 as "Das Unbehagen in der Kultur" ("The Unpleasantness in Culture"), it is one of Freud's most important and widely read works.

[3] José Muñoz Millanes, "The City as Palimpsest": <http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/ciberletras/v03/Munoz.html>

[4] Benjamin, Walter: *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2 (1927-1934), Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.

[5] From Aldo Rossi: "The Architecture of the City", The MIT Press (September 13, 1984)

[6] From: "Roman Renovation: Can Meier Undo What Augustus and Mussolini Wrought?", *The New Yorker*, May 2, 2005, 60, excerpt

[7] "Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory" (*Cultural Memory in the Present*), Stanford University Press, January 15, 2003

[8] Ladd, Brian: "The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape", *University Of Chicago Press, New Ed edition* (November 15, 1998)

[9] In, *ibidem*

[10] (Ladd 1997: 62)

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"Die Ästhetik der Ruine" in: Dieter Kamper/ Christoph Wulff: "Der Schein des Schönen", Göttingen 1989.

youth organization, the bars, restaurants, and the vast public lobby, the Palast unquestionably represented the centre of social life in East Berlin and the showcase of the German Democratic Republic.

It was not a typical government building, of which it had neither the monumentality, nor the introverted design. Thanks to its extensive glass surfaces and its open entrances, it was - architecturally speaking - pure transparency. Though most architectural critics labelled it as a hideous example of the mediocrity of modern architecture, prominent personalities and architects like Rem Koolhaas and Renzo Piano emphasized its open layout, its transparency and its revolutionary design - thus comparing it with the spirit of openness and livelihood of the Centre Pompidou in Paris.

Built upon the ruins of the late-baroque Hoenzollern Palace (former symbol of Nineteenth Century's imperial Berlin), which was seriously damaged during the bombings of 1945 and thereupon demolished in 1951 following the directives of the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei* (SED) of East Germany, after the fall of the Wall the Palast der Republik had to pay bitterly for its original sin.

A first demolition proposal in 1993 triggered a big wave of controversy that once again divided Berlin in two halves - but it was only in 2002 that the Bundestag (under the political will of CDU and SPD in first line) finally decreed its demolition, prescribing the reconstruction *ex novo* of the old Prussian Palace.

In the western political debate, the demolition of the Palast der Republik - symbol of the abhorred GDR regime - has been considered a legitimate retaliation, a sort of final declaration of victory in the Cold War. Friedrich Dieckmann argued that "an incurable fracture divided the personal memories of east Berliners of this popular and convivial place, from the sentence formulated by the *Wessis* of a communist monument" [9]. As a matter of fact, the Palast wasn't quite a monumental building, and for sure it was hardly definable as sovietic or totalitarian (terms that would rather suit the Stalinist architectures of the Fifties in the Karl Marx Allee). Besides, "its function was above all public, and only in second instances a political one." [10] More than two thirds of the long-stretched, low-rise building had been used and enjoyed by the people of East Berlin for almost fifteen years.

[f] V. RUINS AND POSSIBILITIES This doomed monument is now about to conclude its brief as much as tormented history: after more than a decade of intense debates and over two years of temporary uses and artistic inventions which turned it into the one of the most significant artistic and cultural venues in Europe, and in spite of the passionate engagement of the numerous civic initiatives which stood up for its preservation, the so called *Volkspalast* has closed its eyes in January 2006 for political will of the German parliament. Emptied by the artists who had given it a new role - beyond the parameters of good and evil, of left and right politics - its ruins are now haunting once again the Berlin *Innen-*

*stadt* like a ballast of history, a spectral presence, a wounded animal whose steel bones scream bended by the violence of the roller machines. The demolition crews began moving their equipment on site right when the Bundestag delegates voted to tear it down, by a 431 to 120 majority, on January 19th 2006.

In "Der Schein des Schönen [11]", Dieter Kamper argues: "Ruins display a fragile balance between maintained form and decay, between nature and history, between brutality and quietness, melancholy and hopefulness, in a way that couldn't be reached by any intact building or artwork (...). The Process of de-architecturization, be it ruinous or gradual, anthropogenic or natural (...), means above all that the intact building's functional and representational sense has been removed. Thus ruins are likely to become showcases of freedom and of new signifying acts". The ruin of the Palast der Republik allowed, as a matter of fact, for new meanings, new acts, and new possibilities. From the summer of 2004 on, the empty container of about 236.000 square meters, shut down for the first time in 1990 apparently because of asbestos hidden in the steel frame, has been re-adapted, recycled, revolutionized and reinvented by several groups of activists, preservationists, artistic collectives, under the most different names of *Zwischenpalastnutzung*, *Volkspalast - Der Berg*, *Palastretter*, and finally the *Palastbündnis*.

[g] VI. THE REINVENTION OF MEMORY Original plans to entirely rebuild a travesty of the old Prussian palace proved soon unrealistic in a city on the verge of bankruptcy, and wishful fantasies had soon to fade behind a harder reality: The demolition of the Palast is costing several dozens million euros; over 1200 million euros should be required for the construction of the old castle's facades. This soon proved unattainable in a city that is in a chronic financial crisis; besides, it slowly became more and more clear how the neoprussian big-box would be unsuitable for the public destination (an intercultural agora for the citizens) the Berlin Senate claimed it would bestow to it: with the lack of public financing, only few private investors showed concrete interests to the plan - among these, the Interhotel GmbH, which assured itself the permits for building a luxury hotel somewhere inside the late-baroque wrapper. Moreover, the construction works aren't expect to begin before 2012, with completion lost in a remote future.

The controversies around the Palast der Republik and the Prussian Castle demonstrate how in Berlin, the reinvention of a manipulated, purified past is the only force that is even stronger than the idealization of a wishful future. In conclusion, can Berlin still be defined as a City of Layers? Almost two decades after the beginning of the "third reconstruction" wave and the erasure of the Berlin Wall, what has remained of Berlin's haunted past? How has Berlin negotiated its ghosts?

If Freud's Rome is the Eternal City, able to melt all the stratifications of its vertiginous past into a glorious picture of unattainable harmony, Berlin has outlived its recent history of war, destruction and reconstruction as a city wounded with scars and guilt. The politics of urban redevelopment since 1989 have mirrored the will to bring order in the chaos, and to remove painful or undesirable historic traces from sight. These politics document the attempt to level off the vertiginous time depth which in Berlin, more than anywhere else, is a source of fascination and fear.

With the demolition of the Palast der Republik, another layer is laid upon an old one. But, much like on the worn-out walls of the atrium in the preamble of this story, where cracks and holes still emerged beneath layers of paint, the text can surely be rewritten, but a shadow, a ghostly presence might still survive underneath. ➤