Between education, remembrance, and entertainment

Politics of memory and exhibition in post-wall Germany

Yu-Juin Wang (王瑜君)*

Abstract:

In the debate over transitional justice and human right issues, Germany’s "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" (struggle to come to terms with the past) provide a prominent case as this country underwent six regimes (German Empire, Weimar Republic, Nazi, West/East and Unified Germany) within the 20th century and each regime has intended to establish its own myth and rite of public memory. Different strands of collective memories—e.g. the memories of Holocaust, of German suffering and of the division during the Cold War—have interacted with one another to forge the complicated landscape of post-wall memory politics. Exhibitions, memorials and cultural heritages often manifest the on-going negotiating and (re)interpreting between German (post-)national identity and conflicting memories. Drawing on international research on German historical culture and museum studies, this paper will focus on the following themes: questions about the representation of individuality in the wake of mass, anonymized suffering and guilt, the relationships between the named, the unnamed, and the unnamable, and the changing patterns of communications among memory makers, memory users, and the visual and discursive objects and traditions of representations. Special attentions are given to cases where exhibitions makers seek to provoke the visitor rather than to provide a stable framework for interpretation. This paper will conclude with discussion on the question: in what context and to what extent the German case could inspire and empower critical reflection over related issues in Taiwan.

Key words:
German history, public memory, holocaust, transitional justice, museum education

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The fully unified, completed, secure and coherent identity is a fantasy. Instead, as the systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with—at least temporarily ... Modern nations are all cultural hybrids.

(Stuart Hall 1992:277,297)

‘In a land without history, whoever fills memory, coins the concepts and interprets the past, wins the future.’

(Michael Stürmer)

(1) Introduction: Identity and memory in post-wall Germany

Due to its own complicated history, Germany has an uneasy relation with its ‘national identity’. Urban historian and Berlin-specialist Brian Ladd has commented: ‘Germany has been called the first postmodern nation and the first postnational society. Those labels refer to a tendency of German intellectuals to reject any unselfconscious German identity and to insist on questioning its nature and genesis’ (Ladd 1997: 234). In fact, the ‘postnational society’ is not merely an intellectual reflection. Germany, like much of contemporary Europe, is increasingly diverse ethically and religiously. In 2006, of some 84 million German inhabitants, about 2.4%, or about two million, were of Turkish ethnicity and another 6.1% ethnicities other than German. About 3.7% were practicing Muslims. A major city like Berlin has about 200,000 Muslim residents, slightly under 6% of the city’s total population, and about a half-million residents are foreign-nationals.

Germany has one of the Europe’s fastest-growing Jewish community and its members has tripled since unification, largely due to the influx of tens of thousands of immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Germany’s Jews number approximately 120,000, about 10% of whom live in Berlin. However, this number is only about one-fifth what it was in 1933 before the Nazis came to power.

In addition to this multi-ethical perspective, Berlin was in many ways both symbol and flashpoint of much of twentieth-century German, European and Cold War history; it is now arguably one of the most historically self-aware cities in the world. The historian Mary Fulbrook observed (Fulbrook 2009),

Berlin appears, on a cursory visit, to be a city that bears even the lowest points in its history not only openly but brazenly, self-consciously, almost obsessively – certainly in contrast with a city like Vienna, where the Nazi past is remarkably quiescent. There is barely a street in Berlin’s centre that does not have a plaque, a memorial, a sign telling passersby about what previously stood or occurred on a particular site: from imperialism
and industrialization, through Weimar modernism, into the depths of terror and persecution under Nazism; and through Cold War division and Communist repression to, finally, the capital of the united Germany of today.

Many historians recognized that one of the most prominent post-unification cultural trends was the continuation, culmination, and institutionalization of Holocaust memory, also called Holocaust-centered memory or the Bonn memory regime. Rising slowly from subsequently much-criticized obscurity in the immediate postwar years—a period of silence, even repression towards the Nazi period during which a pervasive “amnesty mentality” allowed numerous perpetrators to escape justice— the memory because increasingly prominent from the 1960s onward. Many factors contributed to this trend, one of them is the rise of the local “history from below” and the history of everyday life (Alltagsgeschichte) movements from the 1970s onwards—part of a more general increase of interest in history, heritage, and memory internationally at this time.

In this context, memorials have proliferated since 1990, continuing a trend that dates back to the mid 1980s in the Federal Republic. Notable examples include the Neue Wache memorial rededicated controversially to “all victims of war and tyranny” on Berlin’s Unter den Linden in 1993, and the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, opened in 2005 near the Brandenburg Gate after fifteen years of debate mainly about proper commemorative forms and aesthetics in the “land of perpetrators.”

What kinds of challenges are facing museum and exhibition in the rapid transforming post-wall German society and its complicated dynamic of memory politics? Are museum and exhibition only part of tourist program that have no intention to engage intensively with the complexities of recent German history, let alone with controversies over public memorialization? As ‘historical tourism’ enjoys its boom in places like Berlin, we need to raise some critical questions: What broader interpretations are made manifest through a cursory tour of the highlights (and historical low points) of the sights and sites of Berlin? What is highlighted as central to public memory, and what is in the process downplayed and distorted? This article analyzes the cases of the Jewish Museum Berlin (JMB) and the New Guard House (die Neue Wache) to address these questions.

2. The Jewish Museum Berlin:

(2a) A fabulous success
The Jewish Museum Berlin opened on September 9, 2001 amid controversial debate as to the suitability of Daniel Libeskind’s architecture for housing a museum. Like many other heritage sites and memorials in Germany, the JMB has its own long, complex, and controversial period of development and design: from temporary exhibitions in the 1960s, to concepts for a permanent display as a Jewish department in the Berlin History Museum, or
the integration of Jewish history throughout that collection, to that for a self-sufficient museum of Jewish Berlin, and finally, Jewish Germany. Likewise, the museum building, designed by Daniel Libeskind and opened to the public without displays in 1999 and with them installed in 2001, has also received much study, praise, and some criticism from sources within and beyond academic circles.

In sum, the JMB has been a fabulous success in attracting visitors and commentary. From February 1999 to Autumn 2000, when the JMB was open for tours without objects on exhibition, the empty building attracted some 350,000 visitors who even paid 8 DM (about 4 Euro) for a ticket for this privilege. Moreover, the JMB drew over three million visitors in the first five years it presented exhibitions (2001-2005), with an annual high of 700,000 in 2005. The museum has since ‘branded’ the Libeskind design, as the building’s jagged contour decorate all printed matter it produces. By December 2004, 83% of visitors polled saw the museum architecture as ‘eine Art “Markenzeichen”’, a form of trademark. The public popularity of the building attests to its appeal across social and international boundaries and it has become a common motif on the covers of city guidebooks in the same manner as the Guggenheim Bilbao.

(2b) Libeskind’s deconstructivist design: represent the unrepresentable

To build a ‘Jewish Museum’ in Berlin is to face some fundamental dilemma: How does a city "house" the memory of a people no longer at "home" there? How does a city like Berlin invite a people like the Jews back into its official past after having driven them so murderously from it? Libeskind responded to these challenges by asking himself a philosophical question: if architecture can be representative of historical meaning, can it also represent unmeaning and the search for meaning?

Libeskind intended to create the design for the museum that shifts the perception of Jews as simply victims, a museum that has a civic scale; to create a building with a view to the future and an architectural device – the void – to illustrate the physical absence. His design features parsimoniously and irregularly pierced walls, skewed floors, and zigzag circulation. Prior to the installation of exhibits, the effect of circumnavigating its empty interior was to disorient and destabilize visitors, somatically inducing feelings of displacement, emptiness, loss. The design’s conceptual zigzags and voids were actually ‘planned not as a symbol of Jewish history, but as a metaphor for Berlin’s civic history’ (Kugelmann 2003: 290), which itself has been characterized by rupture, fragmentation, and abrupt changes of direction. In Libeskind’s own words on a sign plate next to the E.T.A. Hoffmann Garden of Exile, 'one feels a little bit sick walking through it. But it is accurate, because that is what perfect order feels like when you leave the history of Berlin'.

(3) The Neue Wache (The New Guard House)
Originally built in 1816–18 as the Prussian king’s palace guard, The Neue Wache, a neoclassical pavilion was redesigned as a war memorial during the Weimar Republic and again during the Nazi regime. After the Second World War it functioned as the East German site for commemorating ‘victims of fascism’. Following unification, the Neue Wache was declared the ‘new’ unified German national memorial for ‘victims of war and oppression’. In the ensuing debates over the new role the Neue Wache, the national media framed much of the discussion on collective identity and the relationship to the Nazi past according to representations of four West German interest groups: politicians, victims, historical experts and citizen initiatives.

Criticisms were also raised regarding the approval process of the memorial and about the function, form and ‘forgetfulness’ of the Neue Wache. These concerns can be seen as a response to the historical uses of national institutions in Germany, a sensitivity to exclusive religious symbols to represent the nation and a difficulty in reconciling the social categories of victim and perpetrator in past, present and future. The Neue Wache today is a well-visited traditional commemorative place, as well as a site of negotiation where official and collective memories, media representation and local cultural productions become enmeshed.

(4) Conclusion:
While Libeskind’s deconstructivist architecture creates an refreshing experience of exploring the postnational identity, the Neue Wache raise critical question regarding the Who, Whom, Why, and How of public commemoration. Table 1 summarizes the discussion of these two museums’ involvement in this ongoing process of (re)exploring and (re)negotiating.

Table 1: Museums in the battlefield of memory & identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Jewish Museum Berlin</th>
<th>The New Guard House</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>opened to the public without displays in 1999</td>
<td>From Prussia to post-wall, enduring 5 regimes.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Architecture</th>
<th>Jewish Museum Berlin</th>
<th>The New Guard House</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Daniel Libeskind’s design of 1989.</td>
<td>Built by Karl Friedrich Schinkel</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deconstructivism postmodernism</td>
<td>The interior was redesigned by Heinrich Tessenow in 1931.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Modernism</td>
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<th>Controversial/ Challenges</th>
<th>Jewish Museum Berlin</th>
<th>The New Guard House</th>
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<td>How does a city &quot;house&quot; the memory of a people no longer at &quot;home&quot; there?</td>
<td>How to negotiate the public memories of 5 different regimes?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How to represent unmeaning and the search</td>
<td>The ‘who’ and ‘whom’ of the national</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negotiation in the process/ lessons learned</td>
<td>Daniel Libeskind’s deconstructivist design of 1989.</td>
<td>Public debates</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Exhibition ‘Two Millennia of German Jewish History’</td>
<td>Official acknowledgement of differences between the social groups that suffered during the WW II.</td>
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<td>Alternative exhibition by the Active Museum.</td>
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References: