

Afterword

Reflections on (Post-)Socialist Curated Environments

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I arrived at Bahnhof Zoo on a train from Munich about six months after the opening of the Berlin wall. It was my first time in Berlin, my first time in Eastern Europe, and my first encounter with a society and urban landscape in rapid flux. There was no playbook, no guides, no internet to provide me with either quick, portable access to visual representations from the past or constantly updated digital maps with recommendations on where to go. My only points of orientation were my memories of photographs in college textbooks and an already outdated Falk Plan. Daily newspapers, of course, detailed some of the changes underway, but even without having watched the wall open or having lived beneath its shadow, there was something surreal about being able to simply wander over to a guard tower near Checkpoint Charlie, climb up into it and survey the landscape. I did that, but I did not stay long. I felt out of place. The city was reorienting and people within it, even visitors like myself, would feel disoriented for some time. Was it the lack of curating that made me feel that way?

Absences, shortages and lacks: that is how the West made sense of the East; those were the tropes that shaped my first days in Berlin. As I sought to understand this unique situation, my tactic, although I did not have the language for it at that time, was to act the flâneur. I had studied German history as a university student and I was preparing to enter graduate school. I had some understanding of the Cold War, and these tropes gave me some expectations about what I would find in (post-)socialist East Berlin.

Mostly, I expected to marvel at the contrasts in the built environment. That happened; but I did not anticipate such palpable fluidity. It was not just the distinctions between East and West Berlin; historians, journalists and political scientists had prepared me for that. It was the ways in which West-German consumer culture was already pressing into East Berlin along the main thoroughfares, marked by the first flashy, plate-glass window displays. One only needed to turn right or left and walk a block to the next parallel street to compare what already seemed like the past with that flashy present and also, we now know, the glitzy future.

There were cultural differences tied to material culture as well. Compartment varied noticeably the further one walked into the East. It was the little things that stood

out, such as the ways in which East German vendors in small kiosks kept an eye on their silverware and dishes. Unlike in Bahnhof Zoo, they were not made of paper and plastic.

There was no tourist market yet in chips and chunks from the Berlin wall, but East German coins were still in use, and those felt so light in my hand, so different from the West German coins I had grown accustomed to using. It was obvious that they had already become souvenirs, and I instinctually collected little sets for my family.

I wrote to family and friends on postcards about the subdued colours, the lack of adornment and the empty shelves in East Berlin's stores. I also wrote about the odd goods I found there and about what was missing. I was particularly stunned by the absence of good chocolate, since the ubiquitous chocolate choices in West German stores had spoiled me. It was a favourite item in the packages I sent home, and I always managed to fit some into my suitcase before a return flight.

Did I author those experiences, or did someone else? Was I in (post-)socialist Berlin or pre-(post-)socialist Berlin? Was it an unscripted present caught between a clearly curated past and yet to be well-managed future? I remain unsure to this day.

Despite my anticipation of difference and my deep schooling in tropes, a lack of things was not what impressed me most. Instead, it was the wealth of history captured in the array of architectural monuments along Unter den Linden, the main thoroughfare in central Berlin. Different epochs appeared frozen in time ... or was it simply an unfortunate mix of curatorial efforts? Either way, I knew I was in East Berlin while walking from Alexanderplatz toward the Brandenburg Tor; yet, somehow, I felt that I was not there. 'East Berlin', as I understood it, was the past place that had once occupied the streets I was walking along in a not quite post-unification present; before other Germans recast and reclaimed those streets; before Germans toppled some statues and renamed some streets; before the bright shops and Trabant tours; before Potsdamer Platz became a gigantic water-filled hole that was somehow also a construction site and tourist attraction; and before the Sony Center sprang up alongside it as a marker of postmodern modernisation and a sign of a new present and future. Is that what this volume's authors and editors mean by neo-liberalism?

The buildings marking different pasts lining Unter den Linden offered me a striking set of lessons. I was familiar with some because I had studied Karl Friedrich Schinkel's Berlin. He was, I had been taught, its leading architect. Was he also its chief curator? The landscape he marked out with his buildings seemed timeless to me, although I knew that they had been designed and built with specific intentions within the last two hundred years. Still, that historical orientation made the apartment buildings that had risen up not far away in the decades after World War II seem anomalous. The East German Palace of the Republic, which the rulers of the German Democratic Republic (DDR) had chosen to replace the old Imperial Palace, seemed the same way. What a misguided curatorial intervention: its copper-coloured windows and stark, cold modern lines stood, as they had been meant to stand, in stark contrast to the neoclassical buildings on Museum Island. The unsettling mix of past and present was disorienting. For if Schinkel's buildings struck me as a natural part of an eternal pres-

ent, the more contemporary, future-oriented buildings did not. Had they been poorly curated? Or did it only seem that way in the pre-unification present?

The museum that most helped me through this conundrum was the one I knew nothing about, even though it was older than the Schinkel buildings and right next to Museum Island. The *Museum für Deutsche Geschichte* (Museum for German History) had occupied the old armoury building or *Zeughaus* since 1952. The leadership of the DDR, which was founded just a few years earlier in 1949, had made the restoration and refurbishment of this building a priority even as they pondered the destruction of the Imperial Palace just a few blocks away. During the Imperial period, the German state had used the *Zeughaus* as a history museum, a house for Prussia's trophies of war. The Weimar Republic and Nazi Germany had put it to similar uses. Perhaps it made sense then, as people were still clearing rubble and scrambling for housing, for the new Communist regime to prioritize its resurrection. The Socialist Unity Party had a historical argument to make about its ascension to power, which built on one already being made by the German Communist Party at the end of the war. Thus, it needed institutions to help it broadcast that legitimisation.

Needless to say, the historical argument curated in and outside this museum was nothing like the German history I had been taught at an US American university. It was a testament to the kind of re-curation that Nikolai Vukov describes in this volume as taking place in Bulgaria. I was fascinated. As I wandered through the entryway, I stumbled into an early history of the German-speaking landscape that quickly led me into a narrative of the period between 1789 and 1949. I took in a history of the Germans in placards and pictures as a struggle between progressive forces – peasants, workers, the common people led by occasional revolutionaries – against oppressive forces – especially capitalists, imperialists and fascists. It was a long, difficulty history in which the members of these progressive forces battled insurmountable odds until they reached the final expression of their mandate with the founding of a people's state – the DDR.

There was a great deal of German heritage woven into this narrative, and its purpose was clearly to educate Germans and others about the ways in which this modern state was built on the best impulses in German humanist traditions, while also explaining the scientific-historic world view underpinning and elucidating this Marxist-Leninist argument. The curators easily linked Goethe and Schiller with Luxemburg and Thälmann, tying classical figures to celebrated communists just as the classical buildings around it would be recast as earlier articulations of the best traditions inherent in this modern new state, captured in the copper-plated Palace of the Republic as much as the celebration of Schinkel's designs.

This was a magisterial curatorial effort: The Museum for German History became a place that would systematically guide German and non-German visitors alike through the history of a great human conflict in a way that was clear, controlled, emotionally reassuring and which impressed upon them their own roles in this drama. By the time I saw these exhibits, they had been tied to international, even global political movements. That was a notable shift from the initial, unitary German history empha-

sised in the original displays. Despite what historians in the West had long argued, Marxist historiography was not static.

George Orwell would not have been surprised by the Socialist Unity Party's insistence on harnessing this institution, and neither should we. Nor should we regard it as a particularly innovative move. Orwell famously wrote in 1984, "who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past". The leaders of the German nation-state, in each of its iterations, those who had controlled its succession of presents, have been keenly aware of this fact. Thus, it should not perplex or trouble us that the DDR leadership prioritized a curatorial effort to draw on the past to legitimate its present and its putative future. Nor should we be surprised that just a twenty-minute walk down the street from the *Zeughaus*, the West German government supported a counter narrative titled *Questions in German History*, a display that I accidentally discovered soon after I left the DDR's history museum was set up in the *Reichstag*. In that alternative exhibit, the former kings and queens, the political liberals, entrepreneurs and industrialists shaped the German past and laid the way to the future, while the German workers, revolutionaries and common people featured just down the street hardly showed up at all.

I was much more familiar with this second narrative. That temporary exhibit, which continued to be displayed for decades after unification, fit in nicely with the efforts by Helmut Kohl's government to harness German history to legitimate West Germany's present. It also dovetailed with the narratives of German history in my US American textbooks. Kohl's efforts were articulated in part by the House of History of West Germany, which opened in the West German capital of Bonn in 1986, and in the plans pursued during that time for a German Historical Museum in West Berlin. The Kohl government meant that publicly debated and highly contentious project to be a conscious response to the DDR's Museum for German History. Its planning, however, fell to the wayside, so to speak, during the excitement over unification.

In 1990, the *Zeughaus* and its contents became the property of the not yet founded German Historical Museum. During negotiations over unification, the DDR's newly elected government agreed that the Museum for German History would be closed in September 1990, and the German Historical Museum would take control of it until unification that October. In fact, the museum was never closed. On the day of unification, the staff of the German Historical Museum took control of the *Zeughaus*, the East German displays were taken down so quickly that no one even bothered to document them and most of the staff were quietly dismissed. After West-German historians occupied the past while their politicians were seizing the present, the *Zeughaus* became the site of a series of temporary exhibits fashioned by West German historians, many of whom continued to fight the Cold War after it was over. That persisted until they created a new permanent exhibition: Were they curating a (post-) socialist East Germany as well as a new Berlin?

Perhaps. Similar to the East German Museum for German History, the German Historical Museum has matured over time. It expanded into a second building just north of the *Zeughaus*, which has been hosting an ongoing series of temporary exhi-

bitions focused on current concerns. Its narratives have also shifted, just as the narratives once did within the building under the East German regime. There is not, of course, a single political party driving those interpretations, as there had been in the DDR, but as the authors in this volume know all too well, that does not mean there are not hegemonic forces at work in that institution that are, and will remain, overwhelmingly political. Nor, for that matter, do those forces shape only the messages within the building, since we also know that the city surrounding it has been shaped by what some of the authors in this volume would call neo-liberalism.

But “who” is that? Who pilots that ominous force? I became a regular in the city during the decades after my first visit to Berlin. I married a woman who grew up there, and we returned frequently. We watched as properties changed hands, as entire blocks in the city centre were refurbished for the incoming government officials from Bonn. We watched as the demographic was radically transformed with each wave of new residents. We watched as Friedrichstraße became a kind of outdoor shopping mall, an articulation of elite consumption punctuated by Bugattis behind show windows and good coffee for all. Those transformations irritated my wife. Berlin, she once remarked to me, remains in radical flux, but no one asked her or other long-term residents if ‘they’ could or should implement those changes. No one asked her or her friends and relatives whose lives were tied to the city if ‘they’ should drive up housing prices, push out older residents in dilapidated neighborhoods such as Prenzlauer Berg and do whatever was necessary to make way for more people driving cars with West German licence plates. That followed a regime change, but was the new regime doing the changing? For whom was the city transformed?

The notion of curating (post-)socialist environments only makes sense if we can identify an agent or set of agents. Simply evoking neo-liberalism is not enough to explain our present landscapes any more than ‘capitalism’ or ‘communism’ completely explained the landscapes of the past. In some ways, those labels even obscure the dynamic tensions that emerge in many of this volume’s essays, as people who remind me a lot of my wife’s former neighbours draw on their memories and past associations to critique recent and current developments. In fact, it is hard not to see the parallels between April Eisman’s recognition that the big shift in Leipzig was not so much from communism to capitalism but, much as in Berlin, a shift from transformations and events in the city being staged more for outsiders or newcomers than the long-term residents. The loss is the connection to the local, the disassociation of the space. If we might identify the forces behind that shift as neo-liberal actions, that act of labelling would probably obscure much more than it could reveal.

For what is at stake in the recasting of landscapes? Such recent recastings are not new acts; perhaps they are simply contemporary acts in a rather old play. Consider, for example, the curation of (not just) German landscapes and cities during the 19th century, when nobles, romantics and civic associations not only preserved but also resurrected ruins. When *Heimat* associations and institutions grew *en masse* across German-speaking Europe, when nature itself was both tamed and commodified as time and space were foreshortened. *Heimat* museums were never simply about the

histories and narratives constructed within their walls, rather they existed in synergy with the extant narratives about their surroundings. Should it surprise us that we observe the same thing happening with monuments and museums in cities and states, that their meanings would shift and change with the landscapes around them? So many of Berlin's museums, similar to the museums in other cities, have been, since the 19th century, part and parcel of civic self-promotion created and sponsored to serve particular cultural, political and social ends in rather general, understandable ways.

Some of the authors in this volume might lead us to believe that the most telling moments are those that reveal that the transformations to a (post-)socialist present or future are not only about destruction and removal but also the preservation of particular, useful traces of the past. That, of course, was true for Berlin's *Zeughaus* as well. The Socialist Unity Party's effort to preserve and harness it reveals as much, if not more, than its decision to eliminate and replace Berlin's Imperial Palace. That second act has received much recent attention, after the government in Berlin allowed the Palace of the Republic, which replaced the Imperial Palace, to be eradicated and replaced in turn with a newer version of the Imperial Palace, the Humboldt Forum. As I hope I have made clear, that was not a novel action. Still, the lack of originality should not deter our interests, for even that edifice has a plasticity that its originators probably never anticipated. That has already become evident in the debates that have swirled around it, in which the nationalist resonances inherent in its architecture have been subdued by stringent anti-nationalist arguments and calls to come to terms with the crimes of German colonialism as well as other misdeeds in the German past.

Ernst Renan once famously argued that nation-building requires a great deal of forgetting; it is, thus, not surprising that myth-busting nationalist narratives profits from remembering. And yet, one must be careful when reading the actions of others before jumping to interpretations. What, for example, does it mean to assault or denigrate a national monument or to call for the destruction of a monument to some past regime? Clearly, there are no singular meanings, even if many scholars continue to seek them.

In 2004, for example, during a walk with a German-born historian in Kreuzberg's Victoria Park, I wandered to the hilltop, which is crowned with a Prussian national monument (yet another Schinkel masterpiece). When we saw that it was marred by graffiti, my companion remarked that some people "just do not like German nationalism". At that point, a vigorous debate ensued as I pointed out that we had no idea who had 'tagged' the monument. We did not know if he, she or they were aware of its original purpose or symbolism. In fact, for all we knew, the urban graffiti artist(s) had regarded this object less as a monument in need of alteration than simply a good bit of urban canvas for his, her or their ephemeral oeuvre. Action art and activist art often reveal a kind of urban curatorial effort that is as subversive as it is transgressive, and which is just as likely to be directed at the political monuments of any regime – should they suit.

I hesitate to remind this volume's authors, or you, the reader, that audiences, which must always be contradictory and plural, often become implicated in authoring curatorial efforts on landscapes and in museums. That is most apparent is some of this volume's localized studies, perhaps most readily in Martin Roggenbuck's essay. Yet even there, I cannot help but wonder about the varied uses that any public institution or object will incur. Therefore, I am always keen to learn more about those uses and their use value.

Simultaneous reimaginings, for example, are not always built on erasures; they sometimes only require the kinds of reconfigurations that Michel De Certeau once deemed "tactics", as he rethought the workings of ostensibly hegemonic spaces. One of the big challenges of studying visual culture remains understanding the multiplicity of meaning-making that takes place among audiences. In some ways, Stefanie Bach and Frank Usbeck remind us of such happenings in the DDR, where multiple actors and audiences sometimes gained platforms on which they could re-curate understandings that fit into both global and anti-colonial trends as well as socialist political positions. Or, as Simone Jansen and Anna-Lisa Reith make clear, old things such as carpets might be given new meanings, or old meanings might be transferred through new things such as modern maps. In that sense, Daniel Habit's reminder that curation is not always or even frequently an action that is unidirectional, something that always must proceed from the top down, is very well taken. Rather, as Beáta Hock argues, radical art, activist art, can immediately expose the conceit of those hegemonic assumptions about the putative power of ostensibly hegemonic narratives.

We have, with good reason I think, become suspicious of such narratives. The lived experience of art and the visual environment is simply more varied and richer than those narratives would have us believe, which is perhaps why it remains important to call such things as "neo-liberalism" labels into question rather than simply evoke them. There is the danger that such a descriptive term might easily become an analytical tool that might work against us by preventing us from fruitfully interrogating the kinds of local processes that intrigue Silke Wagler or understanding the implications of transformations in Bucharest and Prague. How, for example, are those landscapes Nikolai Vukov recognises as persistent being re-curated by residents every day? What are the implications of the hybridities and the polyvalence identified by Marketa Spiritova?

Is it so hard to imagine a creative curatorial force emanating from civil societies in neo-liberal, (post-)socialist landscapes when we have already identified them persisting under the communist or socialist regimes that preceded them? Only if we embrace the desire to force the kinds of homogenization on current societies that nation-states always hoped to obtain. Their historians and pundits eagerly identified national pasts, presents and futures as collective and unitary rather than multiple and overlapping. Instead of succumbing to that impulse, I would prefer us to explore the spaces of polyvalence in realms that we might too quickly assume are controlled by limited numbers of curators acting with consensus – even those we might regard as politically righteous.

