SUCCEEDING BY FAILING: THE BERNAUER STRASSE WALL MEMORIAL AS PERFORMATIVE MEMORIAL

Laura M. F. Bertens
(Leiden University)

ABSTRACT

The Berlin street Bernauer Straße has played an important role in the history of the Berlin Wall, from its initial construction to its demolition. Nowadays it contains the longest remaining stretch of the border zone and an elaborate memorial has been constructed on the site. The memorial is a complex space: it seamlessly blends in with its surroundings, uses a range of media and serves multiple purposes at once. It is this apparent failure to represent a coherent whole that is paradoxically its main strength. A closer look at the workings of the memorial explains its success. The article presents an analysis of the memorial from three different perspectives: a discussion of the eclectic nature of the original Wall and the ways in which the memorial represents this, a look at the memorial as an archaeological site and, finally, an exploration of the performative nature of the memorial.

Die Bernauer Straße in Berlin spielte eine wichtige Rolle in der Geschichte der Berliner Mauer, von ihrer Entstehung bis zu ihrem Abriss. Heutzutage befindet sich hier der längste noch bestehende Abschnitt des ehemaligen Grenzstreifens und eine umfassende Gedenkstätte wurde dort errichtet. Die Gedenkstätte ist ein komplexer Ort: sie fügt sich scheinbar nahtlos in ihre Umgebung ein, bedient sich diverser Medien und erfüllt mehrere Zwecke zugleich. Es ist dieses augenscheinliche Scheitern ein kohärentes Ganzes darzustellen, das paradoxerweise die eigentliche Stärke dieses Ortes ausmacht. Eine nähere Betrachtung der Funktionsweise der Gedenkstätte erklärt ihren Erfolg. Dieser Artikel bietet eine Analyse aus drei verschiedenen Blickwinkeln: eine Diskussion über den eklektischen Charakter der Originalmauer und die Art und Weise wie diese dargestellt wird, ein Blick auf die Gedenkstätte als archäologische Fundstätte und zuletzt eine Betrachtung ihrer performativen Eigenschaften.

INTRODUCTION

During a press conference on 15 June 1961, German Democratic Republic (GDR) leader Walter Ulbricht was asked about the possibility of a state border being erected. He replied: ‘Niemand hat die Absicht, eine Mauer zu errichten’.

© 2021 The Authors
German Life and Letters published by Editorial Board and John Wiley & Sons Ltd
This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
fact, it was not always a wall and it was not confined to the city of Berlin. It was a complicated project, consisting of an elaborate and evolving system of border control measures. In both the history and the memory of this period, one street in particular, Bernauer Straße, has taken up a prominent role.

When, in 1945, Germany and Berlin were divided amongst the allies, this uneventful, residential street was situated right along the division between the French and Russian sectors. The border ran through the street in such a way that houses on the Southern side belonged to the Russian sector, while the pavement right in front of them was part of the French sector. As a result, residents on the Southern side crossed the border every time they left or entered their houses. When the orders came to start erecting the wall, this street was one of the first where they were implemented. The street was divided at first by barbed wire and a few days later workers started closing off entrances to the houses on the Southern side. In 1965, the houses – which by now had been vacated – were demolished, leaving only remnants of their facades which functioned as part of the border strip. At this point the Wall most of us know from news reports and contemporary representations did not yet exist. It was not until 1980 that a new version of the wall was built on the site, characterized by the well-known concrete slabs.

In 1989 Bernauer Straße was again an important location, since the first official opening in the Wall was made on 10 November 1989, between Eberswalder Straße and Bernauer Straße. In the decades following the reunification of Germany, most of the hated Wall has disappeared and only fragments remain. The longest fragment can nowadays be found along Bernauer Straße and it is at this location that an elaborate monument has been constructed to commemorate the Wall and all it has come to stand for. Much has been written on the complex problem of commemorating the Wall in general, as well as on the history and political problems surrounding the erection of the current Bernauer Straße Wall Memorial. The functioning and the many layers of meaning of the monument itself, however, have not yet received the attention they deserve. This article is intended to provide a closer look at the way the site works and in particular at the role of the visitor in making it work.

From the start of its construction, just after the fall of the Wall, until its official opening in 2014, the space has expanded and become more and more complex. Like the wall itself, the memorial is not a simple, demarcated object, but rather an ensemble, constructed over several years,
comprising a range of media and serving several purposes. Its main focus, as described in the accompanying catalogue, is on ‘the victims and on the people against whom this so-called anti-fascist protective rampart was aimed, namely the East German regime’s own population’. The memorial does more than merely commemorate these victims, however, and can be described as an archaeological site, a memorial museum and a performative counter-monument. It presents itself as a puzzle for the visitor to solve.

It is the initial sense of confusion that the visitor is faced with when arriving at the site that I would argue is – paradoxically – the essence of the memorial’s success. Bernauer Straße Wall Memorial is an answer to the complex task of commemorating the Berlin Wall. Aspects of preservation, reconstruction, site-specificity and authenticity all intersect at the site. The memorial is best described as a performative monument, inviting visitors to participate in the constructed memory; it is this performativity that allows it to deal with the challenges of commemorating the Wall and to function as a case study for a broader discussion of performative remembrance of complex heritage, border structures in particular.

The monument seamlessly blends in with its surroundings, uses a range of media and serves multiple purposes at once. The apparent failure of the site to represent a coherent whole can be argued to be its main strength and the reason it is successful as a memorial space. Participation in the monument can scarcely be complete or entirely satisfactory due to the vast and eclectic nature of the space. But it is this reluctance to simplify the narrative and please the visitor that results in a successful representation of the fragmentation of the Wall, in terms of physical and temporal history, of function and, most of all, of meaning.

A look at the reviews posted on www.tripadvisor.com illustrates the impact on visitors. An overwhelming majority of reviews is strongly positive about the memorial (with over 11,000 out of nearly 17,776 rating it ‘excellent’, at the time of writing), with a minority rating it ‘poor’ (140) or ‘terrible’ (59). The complex nature of the site and the unexpected appearance of the remaining Wall is the basis for both some of the best and some of the worst reviews:

Here one can understand the disposition of the Wall and understand that it wasn’t only one wall but a more complex system.

5 Klausmeier, *The Berlin Wall* (note 2), p. 9.
6 Bach, ‘The Berlin Wall after the Berlin Wall’ (note 4), 53; Silke Arnold-de Simine, ‘Memory museum and museum text’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 29/1 (2012), 14–35 (19).
7 https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g187323-d196239-Reviews-Memorial_of_the_Berlin_Wall-Berlin.html#REVIEWS (accessed 11 June 2020).
8 https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g187323-d196239-r530579071-Memorial_of_the_Berlin_Wall-Berlin.html, review from October 2017 (accessed 16 June 2020).
Very informative but confusing site [...] although we arrived at the end with a welcome centre and shop there were no obvious site maps and we had no idea of the extent nor of the information centre further up the road.  

It brings home the fact that it was not just a wall, but a multilayered area.  

[... not in my opinion a tourist attraction as such. Very little to see. There are grassy areas so maybe best just to sit and reflect.

A closer look at several of the characteristics of the memorial (and the wall it commemorates) will help illustrate this ‘successful failure’. The first section will provide a brief history and overview of the current memorial, to be followed by three sections introducing an analysis of the memorial, from different perspectives: a discussion of the eclectic nature of the original Wall and the ways in which the memorial represents this, a look at the memorial as an archaeological site and, finally, an exploration of the performative nature of the memorial.

OVERVIEW OF THE MEMORIAL ENSEMBLE

When the Wall finally came down in 1989, its place in Germany’s cultural memory became almost instantly fraught with difficulty. While so-called ‘Mauerspechte’ were hacking away at the concrete slabs that made up the wall in its final stage, the German people and government were uncertain how to proceed. Many of them insisted that the Wall needed to be removed from the city in its entirety, in order to move on. Others, such as Willy Brandt, thought it unwise to completely erase it from the urban landscape and campaigned to protect parts that were still standing. Although groups of activists managed to keep parts of the Wall intact, notably at the East Side Gallery (at Mühlenstraße), Niederkirchnerstraße and Bernauer Straße, only a fraction was preserved. Over the almost three decades of its existence, the Wall acquired a total length of 156.4 km, 43.7 of which ran through the city and 112.7 around the outskirts of the city. Of this,
less than two kilometres is still standing today. A significant stretch along Bernauer Straße was saved from complete destruction and nowadays this is the only place in the city in which a remaining section of the original border strip can be found.

This authentic piece of ‘antifaschistischer Schutzwall’ has been incorporated in the current memorial ensemble. In total, the Bernauer Straße Wall Memorial covers 1.4 kilometres, following the former border strip at Bernauer Straße (see Figure 1) from where it crosses Gartenstraße in the West and Schwedter Straße in the East. At various locations throughout the site, authentic parts of the Wall are still standing, some of them concrete slabs making up the Western border of the zone, others part of the ‘Hinterlandmauer’ on the Eastern side and in between those (parts of) border structures such as watchtowers, foundations of former houses and street lights. Binding these authentic parts together are new commemorative elements and multimedia installations.
The history of this memorial is nearly as fragmented as the history of the Wall itself, as a brief overview of its development will show. As early as 1990 plans were suggested for a monument and a small museum at the site, by the GDR Museum of German History and a group of activists led by pastor Manfred Fischer of the Church of Reconciliation at Bernauer Straße. These plans were met with heavy criticism, mostly from people who wanted to see the entire Wall go, and the proponents had to fight hard to keep the site from being demolished altogether. It was not until 1994 that a competition was held for the design of a Berlin Wall Memorial and a design by the architects Kohlhoff + Kohlhoff was selected. This plan focused on the preservation of original elements and proposed the construction of two rust-coloured steel walls (6 meters high), sealing off and preserving the original border strip fragment in between. The opening of this initial Wall Memorial took place in 1998, and in 1999 a documentation centre was added to the site, occupying the old parish house of the Church of Reconciliation and providing information on the historical and political context of the memorial. In 2000, a new Chapel of Reconciliation was completed, replacing the Church of Reconciliation, previously situated in the border strip and demolished in 1985.

The three main structures now allowed the visitors to approach the legacy of the Berlin Wall, according to the memorial’s website, ‘on three different levels: artistically, factually and spiritually’. Nonetheless, the site was still in need of improvement. The purpose of the memorial’s design by Kohlhoff + Kohlhoff was emphatically to grant only a limited view of the area behind the ‘Hinterlandmauer’. This, however, proved confusing to visitors and in an attempt to make the memorial more appealing, an observation tower was added in 2003, providing a bird’s-eye view of the border strip fragment. In their discussion of the memorial’s history, Knischewski and Spittler are highly critical of this addition, since it undermined the intentions of the original design and distorted the historical reality of East German citizens, for whom such a view of the border zone would have been impossible; the authors consider the result ‘confused, half-hearted and void of any true East German perspective.’

Even with the (questionable) addition of the observation tower, the ensemble of commemorative elements still seemed rather haphazard and the site as a whole lacked coherence and appeal, something for which

15 Klausmeier, *The Berlin Wall* (note 2), p. 164.
16 https://www.berliner-mauer-gedenkstaette.de/de/entstehungsgeschichte-211.html (accessed 16 February 2020).
17 Knischewski and Spittler, ‘Remembering the Berlin Wall: The Wall Memorial Ensemble Bernauer Strasse’ (note 3), 285.
18 Ibid.
it was criticised. Plans to remedy this were started in 2004, the year marking the fifteenth anniversary of the fall of the Wall. In the lead-up to 9 November a makeshift, unofficial monument had been erected near Checkpoint Charlie by Alexandra Hildebrandt. It consisted of a strip of land on which stood 1065 wooden crosses, meant to represent the people who, according to Hildebrandt, had died at the border. Although criticised for its dubious historical narrative and its role in attracting tourists, the monument did spark a renewed debate over the general commemoration of the wall, which led to the formation of an overarching plan.

This plan, for which the Berlin Senate reserved 40 million euro, was finalised in 2006 and was intended to preserve, extend and connect a number of sites relevant to the history of the Wall. Of these, Bernauer Straße was particularly significant, since this was the site with the largest number of authentic remnants of the former border crossing. In order to make the Bernauer Straße Memorial more appealing and coherent, a visitor centre was added on the corner of Bernauer Straße and Gartenstraße, a row of rusted steel poles was installed to mark the entire line of the former Wall and a new monument, the 'Fenster des Gedenkens', was designed and added to the site to commemorate the Wall’s victims. The entire complex was ready in 2014 and was opened on 9 November that year, marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fall of the Wall.

In its current, final state, the space is divided into four areas, running from West to East, each focusing on a different aspect of the Wall and its consequences. Separate leaflets can be obtained from the visitor centre for each of these areas, A to D. They can also be found on the official website.

Area A is dedicated to the Wall and the ‘death strip’ – the area in between the Western and Eastern wall structures, which contained watch towers, trip-wire guns and floodlights, and was patrolled by guards ready to shoot. Walking from West to East, visitors encounter an orientation table with a three-dimensional map of the area, the visitor centre, archaeological windows showing parts of pre-Wall structures combined with remnants of border fragments, preserved parts of the Western side of the Wall, and original wall fragments that have been moved and grouped together. This section also contains a smaller monument entitled ‘Fenster des Gedenkens’. At the end of the area the most important remnant of the Wall

19 Harrison, ‘The Berlin Wall and its resurrection as a site of memory’ (note 3), 88; Klausmeier, The Berlin Wall (note 2), p. 166; Knischewski and Spittler, ‘Remembering the Berlin Wall: The Wall Memorial Ensemble Bernauer Strasse’ (note 3), 284–5.
20 Harrison, ‘The Berlin Wall and its resurrection as a site of memory’ (note 3), 84–5; Bach, ‘The Berlin Wall after the Berlin Wall’ (note 4), 34; Klausmeier, The Berlin Wall (note 2), p. 166.
21 Gesamtkonzept zur Erinnerung an die Berliner Mauer, ed. Thomas Flierl, report for ‘Senatsverwaltung für Wissenschaft, Forschung und Kultur’, 2006.
22 One should note that, confusingly, at this location the Wall ran almost perpendicular to the East-West division of the city and separated the French sector in the North from the Russian sector in the South.
23 www.berliner-mauer-gedenkstaette.de (accessed 23 April 2020).
Figure 2. Metal plates indicating route of escape tunnel 57, used in 1967. Photo by author.

can be found: 70 meters of preserved border strip, including a watchtower and the original lighting, marked off on both sides by the steel plates designed by Kohlhoff + Kohlhoff. Opposite this is the documentation centre, with an elevated platform to allow visitors to look into the border strip.

The theme of area B is the destruction of the city, and in this part we find the new ‘Kapelle der Versöhnung’, as well as archaeological remnants, relics and old bells from the former church. Area C focuses on the building of the Wall and the main exhibit here includes foundations of a former house, 10a Bernauer Straße, which was destroyed to make way for the border. The final part, area D, differs from the other three due to the Senate’s decision to limit the memorial to the strip of guard path that ran along the Wall here, and to allow the building of houses on the rest of the land. The presence of houses in this part of the site renders the memorial rather fragmented and inconspicuous.

Throughout the entire length of the site, there are ‘Themenstationen’ with multimedia installations where visitors can listen to stories about the Wall and watch short videos. Furthermore, there are plaques in the
pavement indicating important locations, such as places where people died during attempted escapes, markings representing the escape routes and large blow-ups of iconic photos printed on the walls of the houses along the site (see Figure 2). Although city buses stop near the start of area A and there are tram stops along the entire length of the memorial, the most likely way tourists will get here from the centre is by taking the metro to the station Bernauer Straße, which is situated exactly between areas C and D. Arriving here puts you right in the memorial. Apart from an orientation table with a three-dimensional map of the area and a map with a sign saying ‘you are here’, there is little to help you make sense of the site. Information leaflets are available at the far end of area A, 800 meters away. You are quite literally dropped into the narrative and invited to explore. The next sections will provide a close reading of this act of exploration, linking it to the performative nature of the monument.

PRESENTATION AND REPRESENTATION OF A WALL THAT NEVER EXISTED

Despite the work done to make the site feel more coherent and comprehensible, the present-day visitor is still met with an eclectic collection of fragments. Although this might seem to stand in the way of a clear understanding of the Berlin Wall and its history, I would argue that the complex nature of the site actually aids, instead of hinders, our understanding of the history of the separation between West and East Berlin. The Wall has often been represented in a simplified form, which does not do justice to its complexity, and the current memorial makes this complexity visible and invites the visitor to actively engage with it. As such, it sets itself apart from most representations of the structure, found in for instance educational material. This section will discuss the relationship between the original Wall and the current memorial, paying attention first of all to the problem of simplified representation, secondly to the interplay between representation (iconic, indexical and symbolic) and direct presentation, and finally to the dangers and importance of the aura of the Wall.

Going to high school in the Netherlands, I learned about the Wall, which at that point had fallen. The images we were shown of people dancing on the concrete blocks made the structure seem deceptively simple: a long row of concrete slabs, menacing and covered in graffiti. And even now, the most well-remembered photos of the Wall are those showing the iconic concrete slabs on the Western side of its construction. Tourists come to Berlin to look for similar fragments and they find them in the East Side Gallery, a site where the concrete blocks are ‘authentic’; however, their placing and characteristic graffiti stems from after 1989. This representation feeds a simplified narrative: ‘free, progressive’ capitalism in the West and ‘oppressive, out-dated’ communism in the East. As such,
the Wall was understood to function the way most traditional city walls do: as Foucauldian disciplinary technologies par excellence. They serve as physical manifestations of the normative dividing practices that separate ‘us’ from ‘them’, ‘normal’ from ‘abnormal’, ‘civilised’ from ‘barbarian’. These boundaries, both in the physical and in the discursive landscape, tell us where one discursive system ends and another one begins.

The Berlin Wall, however, differed from traditional city walls, by running through and dividing the city, instead of running around it. In the divided city, the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ felt arbitrary to many who became instantly separated from family and friends. Likewise, the purpose of the structure was ambiguous; although officially intended as a protective measure – an ‘antifaschistischer Schutzwall’ – its actual purpose was to stop the steady stream of citizens fleeing the country. The Wall was never a simple structure and neither was the story it represented. As Benjamin Drechsel writes in response to the common representations of the Wall: ‘There is no picture of the Berlin Wall as such – the historical phenomenon has too many different layers in time and space and too many contradictions.’

Commemorating the Wall in a monument that further reduces it to a singular and unambiguous physical object, thus creates the risk of oversimplifying the narrative and maintaining the structure as a two-dimensional line. This simplification can be seen for instance in the East Side Gallery, which focuses on the fall of the Wall, and Checkpoint Charlie. It is also true for the double line of cobble stones running through the city, indicating where the Wall was situated; although less sensational than either the East Side Gallery or Checkpoint Charlie, it reduces the complex structure to a clear and single line. In contrast, the complex history of the Berlin Wall Memorial and its fragmented composition, with its elements scattered throughout the 1.4-kilometer-long strip of land, can be said to present a more accurate representation of the development and nature of the original Wall.

The memorial is characterised both by this fragmentation and by its complex relationship to the object it commemorates. Like most monuments, it refers to the object in an indexical way, showing us the ‘evidence’ left behind by and pointing to the Wall. Photos, news reports and witness accounts all point to the original object. The fact that this memorial is located at the very site of the original Wall, emphasised by the long row of metal pillars tracing its path, furthermore results in indexical site-specificity. Secondly, the memorial represents the Wall in an iconic way through the attempt to approach the true likeness of the original object, rather than (symbolically) simplifying or abstracting, like

24 Benjamin Drechsel, ‘The Berlin Wall from a visual perspective: comments on the construction of a political media icon’, Visual Communication, 9/1 (2010), 5–24 (10).
25 Mette Haakonsen, ‘Marking time: introduction to late-modern memorials’, in: Power memory people: memorials of today, ed. René Lauritsen and Anna L. Manly, Køge 2015, pp. 10–37 (p. 28).
the memorial erected by Alexandra Hildebrandt. Staying close to the ‘authentic’ visual appearance of the site, the memorial shows the visitor the full complexity of the phenomenon. However, the site also contains a number of added structures, e.g. the ‘Fenster des Gedenkens’, which move away from indexical and iconic representation and provide, lastly, a symbolic representation of the Wall, tying the physical structure to the wider political history of the Cold War and the suffering this led to. Together, these different types of representation allow for a layering of meanings attached to the site.

In addition to representation, the direct presentation of remnants of the Wall is significant to the memorial’s functioning. The decision to leave authentic fragments of the border zone where they were originally, without clearly demarcating or isolating them from contemporary elements in the same landscape, can easily lead to confusion for the visitor. Since some of the elements of the border strip (such as the scattered blocks of unpainted concrete) were rather unobtrusive, it can be hard to tell which elements on the site belong to the original Wall and which are mere functional parts of contemporary buildings (see Figure 3). Without the leaflets provided,
the site is hard to navigate and it makes the visitor consider questions of authenticity. What should count as authentic in a landscape that functions as a palimpsest, in which parts predate the Wall, parts were embedded in the Wall and parts were added to the site later? Another good example of this historical diversity of the site is the WWII bomb found during the reconstruction of the church and presented in a display case in the new ‘Kapelle der Versöhnung’.26 The complexity makes the visitor sharply aware of the fact that the Wall was never one object, either in time or in space. This is true for much of the border zone throughout the city, but in particular for Bernauer Straße. For years, parts of the facades of otherwise demolished houses were incorporated in the border and until 1985 a whole church was stuck, like a helpless beached whale, in the middle of the death strip.

Due to its highly symbolic nature, both during and after its period of use, the Wall itself has always already been a monument of sorts. In fact, it has been described as an ‘ungewollten Denkmal’ in Riegl’s use of the word.27 Even while it was still in use, visitors would come and see the Wall to experience the division of the city and much of the symbolism described above was present even before 1989. This symbolic status of the physical object explains the eagerness with which parts of the Wall were collected by Germans and tourists alike, sold off at auctions and given away to other countries.28 (As I am writing this, a piece of the Wall, obtained by a friend of my wife who was in Berlin when the Wall came down, is on permanent display in our living room bookcase.) This same symbolic meaning also explains the fervour with which Berliners demanded that the Wall be completely destroyed. Even after it had been rendered harmless, the presence of the shapeless and functionally meaningless concrete could still trigger what was termed the ‘Berlin Wall disease’.29

The aura of the Berlin Wall remains strong even today, and it is intimately tied to the myth of the Wall as a simple, concrete curtain. The complex nature of the memorial deals with this myth in an elegant way, in order to both preserve and simultaneously play down its strength. By presenting the fragments in their authentic form, it does two things at once. On the one hand, the authenticity of the site adds to the sense of aura and awe one experiences when walking through the memorial. On the other hand, however, the visible complexity and chaos of the border zone problematises the simple aura. Without a single, recognisable object to attach it to, one is forced to let go of the simplified representation and narrative and to start a

26 Andreas Schulz, ‘Die Kapelle der Versöhnung in der Bernauer Straße in Berlin-Mitte: Ein Konstruktionsbericht’, Bautechnik, 78/10 (2001), 733–9 (736).
27 Alois Riegl, Moderne Denkmalkultur: sein Wesen und seine Entstehung, Vienna and Leipzig 1903, pp. 1–2; Brian Ladd, The ghosts of Berlin, Chicago 1997, p. 12.
28 Frederick Baker, ‘The Berlin Wall: production, preservation and consumption of a 20th-century monument’, Antiquity, 67 (1993), 709–33 (723); Drechsel, ‘The Berlin Wall from a visual perspective’ (note 24), 13.
29 Ladd, The ghosts of Berlin (note 27), p. 28.
THE VISITOR AS ARCHAEOLOGIST

The site presents itself to the visitor as an archaeological excavation, suggesting a neat and ordered stacking of layers of history. As Karen E. Till describes it: ‘The archaeological metaphor is often used to give a spatial form to the past: it locates time in neatly defined vertical layers.’ It invites the visitor to approach the site as an archaeologist, unearthing a historical narrative. Not only does this heighten the performative nature of the memorial (which will be further discussed in the next section) but it also can be said to provide a strategy for dealing with the harmful presence of the Wall. It is this effect that will be examined more closely in this section.

When first entering the space, visitors are met with a wealth of signs, embedded in the ground, inviting them to explore and piece together the layers of history. This can be quite daunting and confusing, as well as inviting, as is obvious from some of the reviews by visitors:

There are interesting stories and artefacts about escape attempts but the actually [sic] history is lost in the enormous amount of confusing information boards.\(^{31}\)

[…] it was so much info, to be honest it went right over my head.\(^{32}\)

Allows you to walk through a section of the old wall and explore how it worked. The exhibitions are good and give you a background of the history.\(^{33}\)

Throughout the entire length of the former border zone, metal markers indicate the exact locations of important events. Round plates refer to stories of people attempting to escape or being captured. Each provides the date and a brief description of the event, as well as a letter and number, referring to the leaflet in which the full account is given. They remind one of Gunter Demnig’s *Stolpersteine* that can be found all around Europe, to commemorate victims of Nazi persecution. Metal strips, resembling zebra crossings, indicate the locations of several escape tunnels (see Figure 2), and parts of the concrete Wall and the signal fence are marked by metal lines. At several points the grass of the site has been opened up to reveal

\(^{30}\) Karen E. Till, *The new Berlin: memory, politics, place*, Minneapolis 2005, p. 10.
\(^{31}\) https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g187323-d196239-r275747581-Memorial_of_the_Berlin_Wall-Berlin.html?m=19905, review from May 2015 (accessed 16 June 2020).
\(^{32}\) https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g187323-d196239-r752280896-Memorial_of_the_Berlin_Wall-Berlin.html?m=19905, review from April 2020 (accessed 16 June 2020).
\(^{33}\) https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g187323-d196239-r752366453-Memorial_of_the_Berlin_Wall-Berlin.html?m=19905, review from April 2020 (accessed 16 June 2020).
remnants of, for instance, anti-vehicle obstacles, presented in boxes and resembling archaeological findings.

Not all markings refer to structures and events from the period of the Wall itself. Several earlier layers of history can also be traced. The outline of the original Church of Reconciliation is marked with metal strips, and its original bells and the capitals of its gallery columns are displayed in a wooden structure next to the church, where they were once located. Archaeological boxes present parts of the foundation of the church. Further down the memorial, similar boxes show foundations of houses located here before the Wall was constructed. Area A also contains a reconstructed wall of the cemetery that originally ended here, but was partly replaced by the border zone. And, finally, a prominent feature of area B is the thematic station ‘Das Leid der Menschen’, which shows foundations of the former house at 10a Bernauer Straße. From a distance, this resembles ruins of the kind you find in excavations of ancient Roman sites: remnants or walls of different height, markings in the different spaces to indicate which was the kitchen, which the basement etcetera. Signs with explanatory texts and maps tell the history of the house.

This scattering of historical traces through the strip of land, which is otherwise covered with grass, forces the visitor to carefully read the site. Although there is a wealth of information to be found in the information stations throughout the site, a reading is best achieved with the help of the leaflets that are available. These maps, colour-coded and covered in numbers and markings, resemble the British Ordnance Survey maps, indicating archaeological findings. The small maps look intriguing and make one want to explore the memorial, but at the same time they are not easily understood: the colours used for elements in the areas, red and grey, are not explained and it is not immediately clear which structures are ‘authentic’ and which have been added or moved. The numbers used for the round plates start at 300 (in area A), for no discernible reason, and the numbering does not follow either an obvious path through the site or a chronological line through history. Studying the maps makes one wonder what the reasoning is behind this system.

Encountered in this way, the remnants feel like pieces of a puzzle representing a distant past marked by archaeologists and strictly separated from the visitor’s present. The site resembles the archaeological displays of ancient walls like Hadrian’s Wall and Offa’s Dyke. And indeed, comparisons to these walls appear in literature on the Berlin Wall.\textsuperscript{34} Despite their military nature and history of border conflicts, these ancient sites have been rendered emotionally neutral through time and are more likely to inspire awe and curiosity than empathy for those who might have suffered here. Of course, the events connected to the Berlin Wall are more recent and

\textsuperscript{34} Baker, ‘The Berlin Wall: production, preservation and consumption of a 20th-century monument’ (note 28), 709 and 716.
emotionally engaging. Nonetheless, the scientific, technical presentation of information creates a distance between the visitor and the narrative of the site.

Through this balance the memorial tackles a complex problem: how to represent the full horror of the history surrounding the site, while at the same time rendering it harmless and understandable. The strategy comes close to achieving a state of Hegelian ‘Aufhebung’: the simultaneous annulment, or cancelling out, of a stage and its preservation as part of a larger whole. In this case, the fall of the Wall has presented the antithesis to the almost thirty years of its functioning. When it fell, the Wall stopped existing but simultaneously continued to exist, as a significant part of the city’s cultural identity and a physical scar through the urban landscape. The memorial is faced with the challenge of expressing this state of sublation or, as Tölle describes it, ‘searching the Berlin Wall out of the “archival memory” and turning it into a vital part of the identity-forming life story of the city’. On the one hand the Wall needs to be rendered powerless and inoffensive to those who might still suffer psychologically from its presence; on the other hand, a new space needs to be created in the cultural memory of the city so that the Wall can live on. By transforming the active and aggressive border zone into a passive and well-explained archaeological zone, most of it harmlessly taking place below knee-height, the Wall is largely stripped of its former power and taken into the collective memory of the city.

This temporal distance, between then and now, is reinforced by the use of black-and-white photography throughout the memorial. For most of the period of the Wall’s existence, colour photography was commercially available and commonly used, and many colour photos exist of the Wall and its history. Although the information stations use colour photographs occasionally, all the large reproductions along the strip and on the walls of adjacent houses are of black-and-white photographs (see Figure 2). Whether this effect played a role in the decision to have only black-and-white photography, or whether the reasons for doing so were purely aesthetical, the result is the same and it adds to the site’s archaeological nature: it puts the events firmly in the past.

A PERFORMATIVE MEMORIAL

When I was taught about the Berlin Wall in high school, the aim was to make us master the historical facts. Education on the topic was meant to make us become co-owners of this narrative, presented as factual and static. Although the Berlin Wall Memorial similarly provides a wealth of

35 Tölle, ‘Urban identity policies in Berlin’ (note 12), 355.
36 See Hertle, The Berlin Wall story (note 1) and Klausmeier, The Berlin Wall (note 2) for numerous examples.
factual information about the history of the period, the space deals first and foremost with the memory of these events. And while historical facts can be passively obtained and reproduced, cultural memory is best understood as a continuous act, a performative process of constant and collective construction. As Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney put it, remembering is best understood ‘as an active engagement with the past, as performative rather than reproductive. It is as much a matter of acting out a relationship to the past from a particular point in the present as it is a matter of preserving and retrieving earlier stories.’

Some monuments foreground this performative aspect of cultural memory by making the audience participate in the monument and in the continuous and ever-changing construction of the narrative it commemorates. Mechtild Widrich describes these as performative monuments and the Berlin Wall Memorial is best understood as belonging to this category. Rather than present visitors with a clear-cut, linear narrative, the memorial invites them to explore the separate fragments and reconstruct the narrative for themselves, making each visitor piece together and experience the memory of the Wall. The memorial was conceived with this active role for the audience in mind, as the accompanying catalogue explains: ‘The design relies on empathetic visitors who, when provided with small amounts of information, are able to engage in independent reflection.’

The history of the Berlin Wall lends itself well to this process of performative remembrance by a post-generation. In the larger frame of history, the events had vast political and cultural consequences and the Wall was closely connected to horrible atrocities committed by an oppressive regime. At this level, it is hard for the present-day visitor to find a personal, emotional connection to this cultural memory. Yet, at the level of daily life, the direct consequences were often of the kind that any visitor can emotionally understand – loss of physical contact with friends and family members, missed weddings, birthdays and funerals – therefore creating a ‘way in’ to the cultural memory of the Wall at large.

This layered nature of the commemorated event is represented in the memorial. As we have seen, it employs a mix of confronting authenticity and indirect, abstract representation. Small, personal stories of everyday life stay close to the visitors’ horizon of experience and allow them to be drawn into the wider collective history of the Wall. Several specific elements of the memorial add to its performative nature. We will take a closer look at four of these: the metal poles representing the original location of the

37 Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, Mediation, remediation, and the dynamics of cultural memory, Berlin and New York 2009, p. 2.
38 Mechtild Widrich, Performative monuments: the rematerialisation of public art, Manchester and New York 2014.
39 Klausmeier, The Berlin Wall (note 2), p. 170.
Figure 4. Contemporary representation of the Wall on the left, meeting remnants of the original Wall on the right. Photo by author.

Wall, the ‘Themenstationen’ along the length of the site, the sense of sublime the memorial invokes and, finally, the functioning of its ‘Fenster des Gedenkens’.

The line of Corten steel poles links together the remnants of the original concrete Wall. Although this was only the Western demarcation of the border zone, it has become the most iconic part of the entire border structure and it is this Wall that tourists often come to look for in the city. The poles are unevenly spaced along the border line and resemble the thick metal wires running through the concrete in the authentic Wall fragments. Some of these remaining fragments have been chipped away at so severely that this wiring has become visible, making the similarity obvious (see Figure 4). When walking straight towards the row of poles, one can see right through them and the bars do not constitute a wall. Standing close to the row and letting your gaze follow it into the distance, however, will make the poles blend together and create the sense of a solid structure. The physical position and perspective of the visitor brings the Wall into existence and makes it disappear again, emphasising the performative way in which it is remembered.
Furthermore, the design and spacing of the poles allows visitors to pass through the row, a feature used by many tourists to take photos of each other standing, as it were, *in* the Berlin Wall. What used to be a solid, dictatorial structure can now be crossed in a single step. It can, moreover, be crossed just as easily from either side – a reminder of how untrue this was when the border zone was still active. The ease with which the border can be crossed also increases the grim nature of the numerous metal plates in the grass on either side of the line; the dangerous attempts to escape – some successful, others with deadly consequences – can be retraced by strolling effortlessly through the Wall, to the grass on the other side. Traces of tunnels that took months to prepare can now be used to cross the site, almost like zebra crossings.

Secondly, the ‘Themenstationen’ along the border zone provide visitors with pieces of narrative, thematically divided across the four areas. These stations are Corten steel columns with texts, photos and archival multimedia records; many of them let visitors press buttons to play first-person accounts and news reports from the time, or show videos, again mostly from the period itself, including documentary and news items. Using voice recordings of people who personally experienced the represented events, i.e. ‘authentic’ voices, is essential to the performativity of the memorial. The visitor feels directly and personally addressed by those who have original memories of the Wall and these accounts create a sense of communicative memory, in Jan Assmann’s sense of the term. Unlike cultural memory, which preserves the remembered event and passes it on in a ritualised and indirect form, communicative memory functions in a direct way, with memories being orally communicated by one generation to the next. Of course, the voice recordings, of people unknown to and unaware of the visitor, do not actually constitute communicative memory. Nonetheless, the voice is a strong conveyor of memory and emotion and the sensation of being spoken to mimics the process of communicative memory and draws the visitor into the narrative.

Thirdly, the vastness and complexity of the site adds to the performative nature of the memorial, by invoking a sense of the sublime in its visitors. The existential sublime, as set forth by Edmurd Burke, can be felt in the vast size of the memorial, effectively representing the overwhelming size of the original Wall. Due to its size, the memorial cannot be seen in one glance and in fact parts of it, such as the border zone fragment, are hardly visible at all. In order to see into the death strip between the Western and Eastern border structures, the visitor has to climb a platform across the street (see Figure 5). Walking through the lengthy stretch of original death strip, so

40 Jan Assmann, *Cultural memory and early civilization*, Cambridge 1992.
41 Laura M. F. Bertens and Sara A. Polak, ‘Using museum audio guides in the production of prosthetic memory’, *Journal of conservation and museum studies*, 17/1 (2019), 1–11.
42 See Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. with an introduction and notes by James T. Boulton, London 2008.
explicitly inaccessible when the Wall was still in use, makes one aware of the magnitude and danger of the original Wall. As one visitor describes it: ‘Until you see an exhibit of this nature, it is difficult to appreciate the scale of the wall.’43 Another visitor remarked that ‘the reminder of the scale of the wall is thought provoking [sic].’44 Entering the death strip was a life-threatening activity and the sense of existential sublime that the site invokes is humbling.

This ominous sense of lingering danger is mixed with a feeling of joy at the fall of the Wall. The structure is not only symbolic of an oppressive regime and an enforced separation but also of the toppling of that regime and its defeat. The memorial commemorates the suffering, but to a certain extent also celebrates the victory that followed it. The fragmented presence of the Wall, both because of the partial nature of its remains and because of

43 https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g187323-d196239-r676211558-Memorial_of_the_Berlin_Wall-Berlin.html?m=19905, review from May 2019 (accessed 16 June 2020).
44 https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g187323-d196239-r738682713-Memorial_of_the_Berlin_Wall-Berlin.html?m=19905, review from January 2020 (accessed 16 June 2020).
the ‘transparent’ representation through the steel poles, allows the visitor to consider both the Wall’s existence and its destruction.

The fourth and final element, the ‘Fenster des Gedenkens’, merits further discussion. This smaller monument within the memorial can be found in area A. It consists of a rusted steel wall, about three meters high, with three rows of fifty-four frames, each presenting a victim of the Wall. The frames provide the person’s name, their dates of birth and death, and in most cases a black-and-white photograph (if a photograph could not be found, the frame remains empty). The faces are placed at eye level and most of them look right at the visitor, asking to be acknowledged. The depth of the frames makes it possible to leave little offerings and in many of them one can see white roses.

The wall of portraits functions as an archive and as such it has both the strengths and the weaknesses of this medium, so well discussed by Ernst van Alphen in his book Staging the archive.\textsuperscript{45} The uniformity of the rows of standard issue, black-and-white portraits emphasises the size of the loss, but robs the victims of their individuality. They are united in death, forever stuck in the death strip, where most of them were killed in escape attempts. Nonetheless, the positioning of the portraits, at eye level, allows the visitor to appreciate the identity of each victim separately and to (briefly) connect with them.

CONCLUSION

Designing a monument or memorial for the commemoration of past tragedies is a complex task. Traditional, static monuments can all too easily become ‘containers’ of memory, freeing us from the task of remembering, instead of facilitating it. As such, they have a tendency to become invisible, absorbed by their urban surroundings. This problem was first addressed almost a century ago, in Robert Musil’s influential essay ‘Monuments’,\textsuperscript{46} and James Young sums it up well when he asserts that ‘once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember’.\textsuperscript{47}

In response to these problems, monument design has moved away from the traditional type and new categories of monuments, such as counter-monuments and performative monuments, have been introduced. They aim to remain visible and engaging, through interaction with the passers-by, disruption of their environment or constantly changing appearance. These monuments, however, come with problems of their own. Designs that allow for active engagement, for instance, run the risk of inadvertently inviting

\textsuperscript{45} Ernst Van Alphen, Staging the archive: art and photography in the age of new media, London 2018.

\textsuperscript{46} Robert Musil, Posthumous papers of a living author, New York 2006.

\textsuperscript{47} James Young, The texture of memory: Holocaust memorials and meaning, Yale 1993, p. 5.
disrespectful behaviour, such as the numerous cheerful selfies taken at Peter Eisenman’s *Memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe* in Berlin.

The Bernauer Straße Memorial represents a good attempt at dealing with these issues. Far from statically communicating a narrative, it prompts the visitor to actively engage and reconstruct it. At the same time, the visual complexity and lack of clear aesthetic appeal make it less popular for the selfie-tourist than monuments such as Eisenman’s concrete slabs. Commemorative elements, such as the ‘Fenster des Gedenkens’ and the rebuilt ‘Kapelle der Versöhnung’, are combined with factual, historical information, mostly provided through the documentation centre and the information stations. This feature allows visitors to determine how to divide their attention between memory and history. As one visitor wrote: ‘it really does give you a feel for the emotion as well as the facts’. 48

The site is dense and not instantly comprehensible; the strip of land is too large to be visible in its entirety from any angle (even from the platform) and is dotted with elements of differing nature and intention. This eclectic nature of the site manages to keep it from becoming invisible and effectively prompts the visitor to engage with it. The memory of the Wall lives on at Bernauer Straße, not only in the site and its collection of cultural artefacts and stories, but in the minds of visitors who are willing to put in the work and become part of the cultural memory of the divided city of Berlin.

---

48 https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g187323-d196239-r751190591-Memorial_of_the_Berlin_Wall-Berlin.html?m=19905, review from March 2020 (accessed 16 June 2020).