he traveler’s great temptation is to fix a place with a phrase and then be done with it. Sometimes, despite all the possibilities for error, a phrase does work: Florence lives in its stones, as Mary McCarthy saw; Paris remains the capital of the nineteenth century, as Walter Benjamin knew. Offering such a phrase for Berlin, though, seems riskier because what happened there happened so much more recently. It is a place where history is not yet history, or, more exactly, where the past has a way of returning just when it seemed safe to file it away as dead and gone.

When Berliners asked me last summer, usually with some apprehension, how I liked the city, they would immediately understand my response that “like” was not the word for the place. But that easy point made, one still needed to talk about the city. At such moments, I fell into a phrase that seemed to satisfy Berliners and that allowed me to evade the force of their question. I would say that Berlin was history interrupted by construction. And if I said this in Mitte, the center of the city, there was a quick nod of recognition, for everywhere on its streets you stumble over construction and reconstruction, you feel the vibration of heavy equipment, you hear the Arabic, Polish, and English spoken by workers on scaffolds. As you walk through Mitte, your shoes pick up a thin coat of dust from its building sites. Here, construction-watching has been made into an art form: from the elevated “Red Box” overlooking Potsdamer Platz, where once there was only the “death strip,” you can gaze out at what is called—in the inevitable formula, whether English or German—“the largest construction site in the world.” Here the cranes have been, quite literally, choreographed to perform a ballet of mechanical movement as public performance.

For all that Berlin is a spectacle, you realize after a time that the money and energy thrown into constructing and reconstructing the city are no more than an interruption. After the equipment and workers are gone, the corporate headquarters are gone, the art deco buildings refurbished, memories of all that happened here will still remain. The Wall is gone, but its path will be marked out again in a few years by a run of new construction from Checkpoint Charlie to Potsdamer Platz to the River Spree. The buildings of the late 1990s will divide the reunified Berlin of the future as surely as the city was divided from 1961 to 1989 by the Wall. For all their postmodern glamour, the corporate palaces of Sony, Daimler-Benz, and others will mark the map of Berlin as scar tissue. The wound may close, but its trace will remain. In the meantime, it’s necessary to buy, through building and rebuilding, time away from all the questions that haunt one about the city.

These notes about Berlin come from a month spent at Humboldt University in what was the eastern sector of the city. During June 1997 I taught courses in medieval studies to graduate students, all of whom were in their mid-twenties or older. Their age matters because they were on the verge of adulthood when the Wende occurred in 1989, and it affected them profoundly because they were all raised in East Germany. In the shifting vernacular of the place, they were born Ossis.

My sense of Berlin comes largely from conversations with these students, conversations that were all the more charged because they occurred at a university in the center of Mitte. To talk with students about the writing of history there was not a routine academic exercise. When we left the building on Unter den
Linden where class met, we could walk west toward the Brandenburg Gate and the Reichstag, or east toward the Palace of the Republic, built by the communist government on the site of the old imperial palace. Near where we got coffee between classes was the square where in 1933 students burned books by Jews and other dangerous authors. Across Unter den Linden was the Neue Wache, the Prussian guardhouse that has been made into a memorial for all the suffering and death brought into the world by Germany during the twentieth century.

Reading scholars whose lives and works had been twisted by the Germany of the 1930s and 1940s meant moving beyond the ostensible subject of medieval studies. To discuss Erich Auerbach, forced into exile by the Nazis in 1935; or E.R. Curtius, who spent the war as an internal emigré writing a visionary encyclopedia of medieval literature; or Marc Bloch, who led the Resistance in Lyons and was executed by the Gestapo in 1944—these discussions led to questions about the relations between a scholar's life and the writing of history. And these questions had everything to do with the place where they were asked. As the narrator of Christa Wolf's story "Unter den Linden" says, "I had always suspected that this street leads into unknown depths."

Construction/Reconstruction

Walking on Friedrichstrasse from Unter den Linden to the train station, a distance of three or four blocks, means weaving back and forth from one sidewalk to the other to avoid building sites. You make progress, but not in a straightforward way. Each day, it seems, the barriers have been shifted slightly, so today's route is not the same as yesterday's, nor will it be the same as tomorrow's.

These subtle shifts in daily route force shifts in the way you look at the same site. Crossing at midstreet instead of at a corner means looking at the flow of buildings in ways not possible the day before. Changes in the urban landscape appear: as one building comes down, the view of another opens and what was hidden emerges, though it may soon disappear from view as a new building appears. The history of the city gets played out in its architectural styles. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century buildings that survived the bombing are being restored, and new glass boxes are being erected in the open spaces. From a bench on Unter den Linden you can watch a steady flow of flatbed trucks loaded with plasterboard, dump trucks filled with torn-up masonry or paving, and cement mixers churning away. The sign on one truck could serve as a motto of this new Berlin: für Bau und Aufbau (for construction and reconstruction). When you look up from street level, the horizon line is filled with construction cranes swinging their loads. From one spot on the edge of Potsdamer Platz I counted twenty-nine cranes before the light turned green and I moved on.

There are disconcerting, even shocking juxtapositions in Mitte between the most elegant art deco hotel covered with sexy nymphs in stone and the shabbiest, poured concrete, pre-fab building left over from the German Democratic Republic (GDR), one of the ubiquitous Plattenbauten. It would be hard, if you did not know the narrative of Berlin, to comprehend how it happened that such buildings came to stand next to each other. For how could any one place have such impossibly different senses of how to build and thus of how to live?

Perhaps the most troubling site of construction and reconstruction in Mitte is the Palace of the Republic, which sits on the far end of Unter den Linden from the Brandenburg Gate. Occupying the site of what had been the imperial palace until it was razed because of World War II bomb damage, the Palace of the Republic today stands empty and abandoned because it is poisoned with asbestos. Surrounded by a chain-link fence, it is enormous, evocative, too eloquent a relic from the communist era to be treated merely as a building. And so, overcharged with symbolism, it remains while Berliners argue about whether it should be torn down—because it is ugly and contaminated and thus a reminder of the communist past—or be restored—because it was a place where people enjoyed themselves at restaurants and bowling alleys and thus a reminder of the communist past. Or, and this is no cheap paradox, that it should be preserved
for exactly the reasons some would tear it down, or torn down for exactly the reasons some would preserve it.

Today, the bronze mirror-glass facade of the palace reflects little except the tour buses parked in what was once Marx-Engels Place. They pile in there, their drivers happy to escape the snarl of Berlin traffic. Wisecracks about the locomotive of history being replaced by tour buses forever parked in front of the abandoned Palace of the Republic are easy, almost too easy, to make. More eloquent was the scene I witnessed one afternoon of a group of ten-year-olds on an excursion with their teachers. As they walked the length of the building, almost two hundred meters along the fence, not one of them stopped to look up at the Palace. Even ten years ago that would have been a destination for their school trip; now it's only the edge of a dusty square filled with buses, piles of building material, Dumpsters.

At certain sites, this process of rebuilding seeks some architectural and thus political adjustment between old and new. The Deutsche Bank on the corner of Unter den Linden and Charlottenstrasse has been impeccably restored to its pre-World War II condition; its immaculate stonework and polished metal proclaim it to be the headquarters of a long-established concern, though one absent from the neighborhood for some time due to unavoidable circumstances. But it's back now, and the parade of black Mercedes-Benzes is there in front to assure us that important business is being conducted within. To complete the restoration, a wall of plate glass has been erected across the facade of the bank's upper four stories. The effect is striking because the glass seals the building off from the city as if it were on display behind a museum case. This glass suggests a desire to ward off the workings of time and history, to exist hermetically apart from the grime and pollution that fill the Berlin air, once famously pure and now redolent with complicated odors. Looking at that wall—no less impermeable for being transparent—reminds you that banks are well practiced in the art of historical accommodation.

Throughout Mitte the air smells of partially burned diesel fuel from the rumble of construction equipment and heavy trucks; its scent mixes strangely well with the occasional whiff of human waste that comes up from the sewers. That odor, Berliners joke, lets even the blind know where they are on the old map of the city: east or west.

Looking at Berlin

In Berlin, a scene will arrange itself with such metaphorical, even allegorical, brilliance that you wonder if there is any literal being or meaning to the place. Take something as common as this: the east side of the German Historical Museum, once the old Prussian Arsenal completed in 1730, is covered with scaffolding and plastic sheeting as it undergoes renovation. In this, it is no different from hundreds of other buildings in Mitte. All is veiled of the building's side, yet from above the sheeting appear statues of historical and mythical figures. It is, on the face of it, no more than stonework being repaired. But the eye cannot avoid reading it as a scene about the workings of history in this part of the world. No covering completely hides the past, some trace escapes, and is all the more revealing for being incomplete. To use the title of Brian Ladd's thoughtful book, one can speak of "the ghosts of Berlin," but they do not haunt with a wraith-like mystery.

The danger of looking at Berlin is captured nastily by the joke Berliners tell of the American tourist, the one who wanted to know why Hitler built the Reichstag so close to the Wall. It can be very hard to construct a stable chronology for a city in which buildings and monuments remain unchanged as physical structures but acquire with each change of government new symbolic purposes.

The plan, after the Bolsheviks came to power in Russia, was to make Berlin the capital of the permanent revolution. It never happened. Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg were murdered in 1919. Then came the Weimar Republic, Hitler, the GDR. Enough to make one think at times that Berlin has been the capital of the twentieth century. Yet even here, on Walter Benjamin's home ground, it won't work to follow his gesture of choosing a city as capital of a century. And Berlin is certainly not the Paris of the last century, the flâneur's paradise. For a foreigner, it's not easy
to maintain that ironic detachment. Every site impinges, every attempt to look away from one site brings you face to face with another. If Berlin marks anything in our time, it is as one of the places where the hopes of the twentieth century went to die. And how do you build a monument for that?

**Medieval History**

When I told my students that Marc Bloch was considered by some American scholars to be a Marxist historian because he related feudal society and its social institutions to the agricultural means of production, they laughed. Having been educated in East Germany, they all knew by rote a Marxist historiography in service to the party line. They understood that Bloch’s subtle explorations into the relationship, for example, between the boredom of the knightly classes and the development of chivalric romance as a genre shared nothing with the grand schemes of history they had been taught. About this, they were articulate and shrewd. When I talked about the historiography that Bloch rejected in the 1920s— that of kings and wars, of history as one great event after another—they seemed somewhat puzzled. For that sense of history was familiar to them only through the caricature of capitalist thinking they had learned before the Wende.

That reading medieval history might have some direct political value broke through at the very end of the term when a student, her eyes blurred with tears, spoke about what it meant to read Marc Bloch and E.R. Curtius, Georges Duby and Jacques Le Goff. From them, she said, she learned that history was more than a slave uprising led by Spartacus, or peasant revolts during the Middle Ages, or the failed movements of 1848: that history could be something more complex, less eschatological, than a rehearsal for the Russian Revolution. What she had been denied as a student, she said simply, was the past. And of the medievalists we read, it was Curtius she cited because he had withdrawn during the Nazi years to write his *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, a massive study that argued that the unitary nature of European civilization derived from a commonly-held classical and medieval tradition. It was a tradition, he argued, that had shaped alike all of the Western European nations fighting each other in the 1940s. Curtius’s book stands as an implicit polemic against any claim of German exceptionalism. This student’s praise for Curtius drew, I suspect, on her memories of people who, in the GDR, had kept alive senses of the past other than those that had been officially prescribed. For like Curtius, such people would have struggled to articulate some continuity between past and present that was not a grossly ideological construct.

During these discussions, I felt the sheer amount of work these students had done since 1989 to understand first what had happened during the GDR, and then what had happened in Germany during the Nazi period. For the collapse of the communist regime meant the end of the party line that those who had become West Germans were all originally Nazis, while those who had become East Germans had always been heroes of the antifascist resistance. These students had to discover layers upon layers of distortions and untruths. At times it was almost unbearably painful to listen to them as they worked through these layers. When I said, with some hesitation, that Bloch had been executed by the Gestapo because he was active in the Resistance, they grew silent and uncomfortable. They did not speak after I told them this but wanted to know more about Bloch’s life and death. Their silence was not the silence of denial, as it might have been for an older generation. It was the silence that comes from a sense of not knowing enough, of trying to learn more, of needing to understand before speaking. It was a form of tact.

Thinking back on these class discussions, I realize that the students could only say so much about what they had experienced in the past and were learning in the present. They needed time, above all, to think through what they were encountering both inside and outside the university. They had experienced too many shocks of recognition in the past eight years or so to speak without long reflection. And yet they showed remarkable resiliency. Perhaps it helped that we were talking about medieval culture rather than twentieth-cen-
tury history, perhaps it helped that I was American and not West German. Perhaps it helped that I told them my father was Jewish. And perhaps it helped that we spoke in English and not German. For these all gave us ways to think obliquely about what it meant to be meeting as a class four stories above Unter den Linden in June of 1997. That is, of thinking about what it meant to do something that even ten years ago none of us would have thought possible in the course of our lives.

**Intact Ruins**

Amid the renovation and construction in Mitte, there are continual reminders of the shabbiness that the GDR had become by the late eighties: platforms in train stations crumbling away, tiles falling off building facades on the former Stalin Allee, decorative stonework of the early twentieth century eaten away by pollution. Driving through Pankow or elsewhere in the old East Berlin, you see bright storefronts at street level with all sorts of attractive things in the window. And then you look up to the higher floors, which are soot-blackened from the soft coal used for heating. A long accumulation of grit, a lack of materials and money to keep things in repair hang heavily over these neighborhoods. A few buildings have been repainted, fitted out with new windows, and the difference is startling, in part because these simple improvements make you ask why it had been necessary for people to live in that grayness, that absence of color and light.

Another visible reminder of life before the Wende is the Trabant, the East German car people waited years to buy new and, in fact, paid more for used so they could get one sooner. Plastic-bodied, powered by a two-stoke engine that belched pollution from the oil and gas mixture it burned, ugly beyond words. Today a Trabant parked in a street beside a modest Volkswagen seems a relic from a time when people heard rumors from elsewhere about things called cars. And from these rumors they cobbled together the Trabant. Crossing traffic in Jena, I turned to a friend and said, “However I go, I don’t want to be hit by a Trabant.” To which he replied, “Not to worry. It would get the worst of any collision.”

Nothing in Berlin approaches the desolation one sees from the train as it passes through the old industrial centers of East Germany, such as Leipzig and Bitterfeld. In the aptly named Bitterfeld, once the center of the chemical industry, the factories are empty: windows are blown out, bushes grow through the roofs, the endless pipelines from building to building sag under their own weight. The view speaks of apocalypse but not of any sudden sort; this desolation comes not from fire, earthquake, bombing, but from long neglect and final abandonment. Weeds grow in parking lots, strips of paint hang from buildings, the odd piece of rolling stock sits rusting on a railway siding. The leukemia rates here are said to be among the highest in the world.

The signs of desolation in Mitte are far more subtle than those in Bitterfeld, such as the pockmarks left behind by bullets and shrapnel fragments. Even meticulously renovated buildings show some of these traces in their stonework if you look carefully enough. More picturesque is the ruined edge of the Museum of Natural History: a bombed-out shell from World War II that sprouts grass from its walls and trees from what remains of its roof. It looks like nothing so much as a medieval ruin lovingly tended by caretakers. Students at the nearby agricultural school of Humboldt University want it kept in its current state. And it does add a certain charm to the place. As a professor there remarked, with the irony characteristic of the city, it is “the only intact ruin left in Berlin.”

This phrase captures the particular moment of Berlin in 1997, but it also set me to thinking about the fact that the great museum of Berlin, the Pergamon, has been from the start a collection of intact ruins lifted from various places in the ancient world. This is not the usual collection of antiquities displayed in cases and halls of sculpture. Here you can see in reassembled form the massive Greek altar from Pergamon in Turkey and the Ishtar Gate from Babylon. Whatever questions of national heritage these ruins raise with respect to their places of origin, they are by now very much a part of twentieth-century Berlin. The history of ruins is a
kind of secondary display here, and is the subject of several murals located in the far reaches of the museum away from the heavy tourist traffic.

These murals, dated and signed -19-EA-36-, can be found in rooms filled with antiquities excavated from Syria. They depict the sites in idealized form, that is, as ruins that have yet to be dug. A few animals and natives in vaguely appropriate costumes appear in each scene, but the emphasis is on the tumulus, or mound, waiting to be opened. The murals are romantic, verging on an unearned sublimity. They celebrate the workings of time and the wonder provoked by the unspoiled; but their presence in a room filled with artifacts from the site suggests they are meant to celebrate archaeology as the romance of origins and archaeologists as figures of heroic power. If the murals had been painted in the last century, they would simply seem mythmaking at the expense of the past. But painted in 1936, these murals suggest that the ruin is an intact site precisely because from it one can make the past one desires. Almost forgotten, these murals may be the most cautionary display in Berlin about the ideological dangers of reading the past.

Fragments
Often it is the fragment that helps you resist seeing Berlin as allegory. Details preserve the character of the place:
(1) in the trainyards of East Berlin, a black, coal-burning steam locomotive fires up next to a white bullet-train;
(2) WEST cigarettes, sold in West Germany long before the Wende, are advertised with heroin-chic models and an English slogan, “The Power of Now”;
(3) old Trabants parked on the streets gain new life as movable signs for restaurants and shops;
(4) water mains, painted bright colors like pink or yellow or lavender, run twelve to fifteen feet above the sidewalk because the underground lines are unusable;
(5) bored riot police waiting out a demonstration on Unter den Linden pass the time by fixing the windshield wipers on their water-cannon truck;
(6) a menu in a trendy restaurant offers Boston spareribs with the promise that they are a traditional American specialty;
(7) the globe of the old East German television tower, called from its shape Telespargel or “TV Asparagus,” shows the reflected rays of the setting sun from the west in the form of a Christian cross;
(8) a punk pisses openly on Friedrichstrasse and then meticulously places his beer can in a recycling bin;
(9) signs on buses and trucks proclaim Lotto macht Millionäre, Wodka Gorbatschow, Tour Nostalgie (on a 1920s-style bus), Deutsche Bank, Manhattan Ice Dream, The American Dream of Ice;
(10) the Tränenpalast, or “Palace of Tears,” where families separated by the division of Germany would say their farewells at the Friedrichstrasse Bahnhof, has become a music hall and beer garden.

Leipzigerstrasse
Along Leipzigerstrasse, where the huge, block-long apartment buildings of 1970s East Berlin stand, there’s a windblown feeling: lots of scale and an empty monumentality that seem utterly unlike the closed-in feeling of residential neighborhoods from pre–World War II Berlin. Walking past these grandiose buildings, you feel exposed, open to view, without any of the protection that the nooks and crannies of older Berlin give the walker: arcades, courtyards, deeply recessed doorways. It is an unpleasant place to be caught in a sudden downpour. And when I was caught, huddled under the awning of a Chinese restaurant at the corner of Jerusalemerstrasse, the thought came to me that this lack of protection, this exposure to the elements had everything to do with the politics of the old regime. You were meant to be exposed, to be out in the open without a nook or cranny to shelter in. That regime may be gone but an outsider can still sense how it worked by moving through its public spaces.

Now, the shops along Leipzigerstrasse have shiny facades and plenty of goods on display: bright clothes, discount electronics, cheerful housewares. McDonal’d’s advertises prominently, and its images of golden arches seem perfectly in place. The only shabby—in fact the only vacant—commercial space for blocks
is the PRAHA restaurant in what had once been the Czech Center. Its windows are coated with several years of grime and letters are falling out of the old signs. Nobody wants to eat there anymore. Or needs to.

Alexanderplatz
The old proletarian neighborhood of Alfred Döblin’s novel Berlin Alexanderplatz is long gone. Now it is a vast open space with, at its middle, the “Fountain of Friendship between Peoples.” Even on a sunny day in June the place makes you think of bleak December afternoons when the sky is gray and the wind blows old newspapers round and round. The empty ceremonial spaces of East Germany, such as the Alexanderplatz, have a brutality that persists despite the change of government and the inrush of capitalist consumerism. Even in rebuilt form, these spaces seem too big. Since the Wende, new shops have moved in and neon signs display the names of international business: Mazda, Denon, Fanta, Sanyo, Speedo. On one edge of the platz, across the street, a socialist-realist mural of noble workers appears in the same view as a huge blue sign for FIAT. On the other edge, a tight circle of punks huddles under a covered walkway at the edge of the place. Against the unrelieved black of their clothes, the only visible color comes from the red and white chevrons of their Marlboro packs.

Checkpoint Charlie
The officially posted text on the fence reads: “Checkpoint Charlie, once the political focal point of the cold war, now is a construction site for five new buildings and will become a prominent symbol of free trade.” One of the buildings has been designed by Philip Johnson, a fascist sympathizer in the 1930s. Now, finally, he gets his chance to be a master-builder in Berlin. At this moment, it all comes together: his old politics, his edifice complex, his status as the favorite architect of late international capitalism. On the billboard at the site of Friedrichstrasse 200 he stands smiling and pointing to a rendering of the building still under construction. The building, as it emerges, promises to be utterly clichéd, a box of metal and glass with a few postmodern flourishes that could be anywhere corporations build
headquarters. The architect’s major contribution seems to be his name: Philip-Johnson-Haus. Where once the CIA and the Stasi stared at each other from the upper floors of grimy buildings along the Wall, there will be a new crossing zone for money. The cold war ends in a farce of postmodern kitsch. Checkpoint Charlie becomes Checkpoint Cash.

About a kilometer north, on the blocks between Unter den Linden and the River Spree, Friedrichstrasse is being completely rebuilt, from sewer lines to new sidewalks. From a certain angle, the construction barriers and heavy equipment that force cars to move at a crawl and to shift lanes constantly look like nothing so much as photos of the eastern side of the old Checkpoint Charlie. Bulldozers have replaced tanks, and the danger to anyone crossing comes from an accelerating BMW rather than a border guard’s machine gun, but the pattern of traffic flow seems eerily to reenact what once stood blocks to the south on Friedrichstrasse.

Looking at the streets of Berlin means learning to read the reenactment of place: the old patterns that seemed gone forever reemerge in unexpected ways. These patterns reveal and distort at the same time, and thus remind you that all claims about this city and its history must be provisional. To complete the metaphor by making it literal again, the streets are filled with detours and unexpected turnings so that even a one-way street, an Einbahnstrasse, will be reversed for a few days so trucks can serve a building site.

Tourists
The Wende is still so recent that Mitte is filled with West German visitors. Overheard snatches of tourist-guide talk on Unter den Linden make clear that this is a place whose history must be told and retold to Germans as well as to outsiders. There are buses from elsewhere in Europe, though hardly as many as there would be in a similar area of Paris. Most of them have signs that declare their German provenance. Many are from the more distant states, especially Bavaria. They are so numerous that it can be difficult to photograph a historic site, especially one that has an obvious vantage point that an idling bus can occupy. They pull up, one after the other, while the guides deliver their spiels to the seated tourists, and then move on to the next site. The spot is filled immediately by the next bus in line. On a Thursday morning I waited for more than half an hour so I could photograph without including a bus the balcony from which Karl Liebknecht proclaimed the socialist republic in 1918. When I got my photographs developed, I saw the one I took with the buses jammed in front of the balcony was more evocative than the one I waited so long to take because it showed that the site was a public spectacle.

Sitting out a rainshower on a Saturday afternoon under the Brandenburg Gate, I was approached by a young man from Egypt (as he explained) who asked in impeccable English if I knew much about the place. He was dressed in expensive sports gear and carried a shopping bag from Planet Hollywood. He could have been anywhere or from anywhere. When I told him I knew a bit about Berlin, he seemed relieved and quickly asked which was east and which was west. I pointed east and then west. So much for my obsession with history and geography.

Modern History
The voices of history that reverberate across Berlin are most visibly present to the eye in the concentration camp at Sachsenhausen, just outside the city. The museum there, built in 1961 by the GDR, still maintains its original display of black-and-white photographs from the old days of Party leaders laying wreaths and inaugurating the ghastly memorial to the political prisoners who were killed there by the Nazis. At the center of each photograph, or so it seems in my memory, are figures of the regime in dark suits and hats; they look prosperous, certain of the role they are playing at this site, convinced. On the edges of these photographs are those who had been political prisoners in Sachsenhausen. Their faces, especially in the older photographs, seem shadowy, difficult to interpret, withdrawn in the midst of the public ceremony they are attending. Accompanying each photo is a neatly typed label in German giving the
date it was taken and the names of those it depicts. The Sachsenhausen of these displays is less a museum than a martyrology, a site of unwavering heroism, as is apparent from the socialist-realistic images in stained glass that greet you at the museum’s entrance and from the memorial of poured concrete at the far end of the camp. The tower of that memorial is unadorned except for red triangles like those worn by the political prisoners of the Nazis. No other group of prisoners is remembered by this monument.

From the photos in the original GDR installation you will not learn that for five years after the war’s end the Russians used Sachsenhausen as a prison for their political enemies and then handed it over to the GDR to use for the same purpose. In this installation, Sachsenhausen’s history as a concentration camp ceases in 1945 when it was liberated by the Russian army. Subsequent years go unmarked, just as prisoners who were not political go unnoticed. After the Wende another voice was added to the museum’s walls to speak—of necessity and by design—alongside that from the GDR period. On long scrolls that hang from the ceiling appears in large bold print the complicated history of the camp in the years before and after 1945. The voices telling this story speak in both German and English. That this revisionist account of Sachsenhausen also appears in English gives it the authority to reach the larger world. Nothing in the museum can finally speak to the desolation of the camp. Most of the barrack huts are gone, each marked in absence by a large block of stone that bears its number. The exterior walls and guard towers remain, as does some of the barbed wire, rusted and broken into bits. The site is mainly a large grass field, with a few wildflowers of white and blue. On a hot June afternoon the dust blows off the paths.

In the midst of the open ground, a tent stands to document where in 1992 neo-Nazis torched several of the surviving barracks that had once held Jewish prisoners. Inside the tent are exhibits of the destroyed barracks because the desire to eradicate history, to burn it to the ground, must itself be remembered. And that becomes another voice in your head as you walk the camp, one that must somehow be included along with those that hang beside each other on the walls of the museum, and with those that can no longer speak for themselves.

Walking into Sachsenhausen I passed some teenagers photographing each other beside the sign on the gate that reads “ARBEIT MACHT FREI.” On leaving, I passed a group of Gypsies coming to mourn their dead. Another people’s voice to hear, to record.

From the River

The view from the River Spree, except around Museum Island in Mitte, is not like the view from the Thames or the Seine. Berlin did not plan its buildings and public spaces around the river but inland because it was a Prussian military city and needed grand avenues and parade grounds to display its infantry. Yet from a boat on the Spree you gain an unintended vantage point for seeing the city. Everything becomes disoriented when you look, for example, at the Reichstag from an oblique distance so that, in the foreground, a vast construction site fills the space where the Wall ran to the river. For most of the run, the trip on the Spree is a pleasant excursion, especially in the west where its banks are heavily treed and people use the greenspace to stroll, play with kids, escape the pavement of the city. It seemed right that one German couple brought their big dog along on the boat. He slept, they drank beer, all were happy. Part of that happiness came, I suspect, from the fact there is little history visible from the Spree. The Charlottenburg Palace is not, like the Louvre or the Tower of London, built on the river. Only as the boat makes its turn through Mitte and the Museum Island does one get a feeling that this is a city where too much has happened: the Bode and Pergamon M useums, the Prussian Arsenal that is now the historical museum, Humboldt University, the Cathedral, the Palace of the Republic. One senses that these buildings relate to each other, that they have always formed the center of the city throughout its various incarnations. To get this coherence you need to return to the streets and move among the buildings. That the city does not derive its plan from the river is proof
of its martial character, and modernity.

In Berlin, where the intended view is often too painful to hold for long, it is useful to see from the oblique, from the unintended angle that is opened up by changes of history. Put it this way: the angles of sight in Berlin are those of grand avenues and ceremonial approaches, such as the Brandenburg Gate with its chariot and four horses facing east, the Quadriga. These angles of sight carry with them political impositions. To see otherwise, as from the river, is a relief, an opening into what was not intended or desired. Much the same holds for looking at buildings wrapped in plastic and scaffolding, or for glimpsing the Brandenburg Gate across a construction fence covered with bright posters for a spectacle called "Erotik-Life." At such moments, nothing looks imperial and thus nothing looks as it was meant to look in Berlin.

The New Watch

The Käthe Kollwitz statue of a mother holding the dead body of her adult son is low to the ground, heavy, maternal. She is meant to hold all the griefs of this world. Despite its earnestness, its somber dull bronze, this statue of the earth mother stands for nothing so much as the failure of representational art. It wants to rip our guts out, to make us howl for all the sorrows of our century, and thus fails. It lacks the mute eloquence of the memorial to the book burning across Unter den Linden. The statue looks like nothing so much as a pietà, and sets off questions about what is being remembered and how it is to be remembered. For if this monument does acknowledge, as the sign outside says, victims of the "Konzentrationslager," then why is the image here so resonant of Christianity? Or, more precisely, of the Christian story about the son who was sacrificed by his father for the redemption of humankind? For what can that say to those who would remember the six million of the Holocaust?

These questions about the statue are ways of saying that there is something more than a little confused about this site. Built originally as a guardhouse for the Prussian emperor’s watch in 1818, it became: in 1931, a monument to German troops who fell in World War I; in 1960, a GDR memorial for the victims of fascism and militarism; in 1969, the resting place for an unknown soldier and an unknown camp victim; in 1993, a place of memory as well for civilian victims of Nazism and those who resisted totalitarian dictatorship after 1945. Too many people have put the memorial at the Neue Wache to too many purposes. It must bear as a result an impossible name: "Central Memorial of the Federal Republic of Germany for the Victims of War and Tyranny."

Inside the building itself there is a gloomy solemnity. The floor of irregular, small dark-gray paving stones, the walls made from blocks of lighter gray limestone are subdued, even anti-monumental. Above the statue of mother and son is a round skylight that focuses the light on these two figures as if to offer a ray of hope, a beam of illumination; but one knows they cannot be so easily illuminated. Very few visitors descend the two shallow steps from the entrance level to the floor of paving stones, where the statue rests, though that is permitted and some have left flowers at its base. There seems to be a felt need here not to walk too close, not to cross the symbolic space of memory. At such places, even a few feet of distance becomes necessary.

It seemed better to me to look through the vertical iron bars that close off the two side entrances because that evokes the photographs taken in 1945 during the liberation of the camps. I kept thinking of the gaunt, skeletal faces that stared out at the photographers from behind the fences, those specters who somehow managed to survive. And then the heaviness of the Kollwitz figures becomes almost unbearable. Their physical weight, their fleshiness itself seems a form of denial. Grief here should be skeletal, gaunt, the last remains of the human body at the edge of extinction.

The statue seems wrong in another way. It conveys a vision of war in which young men suffer actively and die, while their mothers suffer passively and survive, one in battle and the other at home. But the twentieth century has had no place for such chivalric roles as the valiant fallen son and the nobly grieving mother. To memorialize women with this statue effaces the suffering and death women themselves knew in a
time when there were no distinctions between the killing fields and home.

**Opernplatz, Now Bebelplatz**

When the books were burned on May 10, 1933, Opernplatz was a parklike space with trees. Now at the center of its paving stones there is a square of glass, perhaps 1.5 meters square, set flush to the ground. It opens to a view of a larger room below. On each side of this room, which is perhaps three meters square, is a tier of ten bookshelves that runs from floor to ceiling. The interior is painted white. All of the shelves are empty. As a German friend said to me wisely, how else can you memorialize something that has been burned and is no more? There is a muteness here that seems infinitely moving. Set as it is amid—yet below—the grandiose buildings along Unter den Linden, the starkness of this memorial seems just because it is silent. Two small bronze plaques on either side of the glass square record the event and quote three lines from Heine on the human cost of book burning. It is a place of infinite sadness.

Now, several years after the memorial was installed, its thick green glass is scuffed and, at certain times of the day, difficult to see through. In the morning, when the sun shines at an angle, you must put it behind you so you can cast a shadow that cuts the glare and lets you look past the glass to the white interior. At no time of the day can you photograph through the glass to the room below; you can only photograph those looking at it from above. It is a memorial that rejects the idea of the monumental as publicly visible, as calling attention to itself. From Unter den Linden, perhaps fifty meters away, you will not know it is there, though you may wonder why there are people staring at the paving stones of the place. The book memorial rejects what looms behind on Unter den Linden, the monument of Frederick the Great looking eastward. That stature now seems an unconscious parody of empire's pomp: lots of metal, a big horse, grandly phrased inscriptions. The book memorial sinks below the surface to remember what happened and then what was suppressed. Under the communist regime, the site was a parking lot.

This monument seems complete precisely because it cannot be photographed through its glass and reproduced mechanically. It forces one to look at the site itself and remember it not as image but as the space of a defining historical event. That it denies viewers the conventional gestures of mourning may be grasped from the fact that not once in the month during which I visited it daily did I see a bouquet of flowers laid there. I saw bouquets at the Neue Wache across the street, I saw them on Frederick the Great's grave at Sans Souci in Potsdam as well as at his statue on Unter den Linden, I saw one placed among the stones of the bombed-out Frauenkirche in Dresden. But never at Bebelplatz.

A different memorial to the book burning occurs daily in the front courtyard of the main university building across Unter den Linden. Sellers of used books set up their tables and do a good business with students, faculty, and tourists. From a certain angle, one can look through the book-buyers to see across the street to where, flush to the ground and mute, rests the memorial to the burning of the books. That view of people freely reading books is worth more than all the bouquets left at the other sites of memory.

**Columbus, Ohio**

As I finish writing these notes about Berlin, I receive a summons for jury duty in federal court. I arrive at the appointed time but, after answering a few questions, I am excused from service because I know too much about this case involving a local Neo-Nazi warlord. Having been convicted of robbing banks to finance his political group, he now faces charges arising from a gunfight with the FBI when he was arrested less than two years ago. Of the two hundred and twenty people called for jury duty, only twenty-five or thirty ask to be excused because they have prior knowledge of the case. A past so recent it can only be called the present slips out of memory here in Ohio, and I think again how much harder it must be to remember in a city like Berlin filled with monuments and memorials.

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