

Brian Ladd: *The Ghosts of Berlin, Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape*. University of Chicago Press. 1997. 282 pp. \$30.00

Brian Ladd's book, *The Ghosts of Berlin*, is something like the biography of a city. With painstaking thoroughness, the author investigates the changes in meaning that Berlin's architectural self has experienced during its "lifetime." He uncovers the manifested and the hidden history of this city as well as the complexities of its life through its actual buildings, streets, traffic, and monuments and through the blueprints of unrealized projects, such as Hitler's grandiose plans for a thoroughly revised capital. The result is a fascinating book about the development of Berlin and its role in national and international politics from the Middle Ages to the present.

Ladd's method is that of a semiotician who recognizes all man-made structures as signs. He reads the rise and fall of the city and its artifacts in the context of culture and politics. What is a monument, he asks. What constitutes commemoration? This seemingly straightforward, if challenging approach, gets complicated by the conflict-torn, complex history of Berlin. What, indeed, does Berlin signify: Prussia, modernity, The Third Reich? With these questions, Ladd is already in the thicket of the claims on Berlin of various constituencies and in the middle of his own claim that there are as many "readings" of Berlin and its architectural objects as there are readers. As Ladd makes explicit, giving a name and ascribing a function to a building are intensely political activities. The interpreter of cities who unearths and describes these meanings, however, faces the challenge that they do not only change in the course of history, but often get turned into their opposites, so that a column that signifies victory to one generation may mean defeat and shame to the next. Or, the contradiction may not express itself in a vertical way, producing breaks in meaning between one generation and the next, but horizontally, in different political or artistic camps.

An excellent example of this complex process, as well as of Ladd's method, is the interpretation of the Wall: Seen during the Cold War as a shameful testimony to East German politics (the official reading of the FRG) or as "antifascist protective rampart" (the official term for the Wall in East Germany), it was at the same time an international symbol of the fault lines between East and West, rhetorically exploited as such by visiting statesmen, the most famous of whom was probably John F. Kennedy in 1963 when he proclaimed himself to be a Berliner. With the destruction of the Wall as a physical object and the end of the Cold War, "the wall in our heads," as Ladd quotes from Peter Schneider's *The Wall Jumper*, still played a great role in people's thinking (p. 33). In fact, after its demise, the "relic" was able to fuel the imagination of those who were for unification as well as those who opposed it, albeit in opposite ways, and thus continued its existence as a powerful symbol of contested meanings. A small part of the wall continues an artistic afterlife as "Eastside Gallery," along Mühlenstrasse, though the

graffiti on it hails from post 1990. That fragments of the Wall should end up for the most part in a heap of rubble in northern Berlin, and prized chunks of world history, as decoration in corporate offices, tips the ironies of history over towards the grotesque and leaves the reader with an almost baroque sense of the vanity of all things human.

As a consequence, it is as impossible to take away from Ladd's book clear pronouncements about the meaning of Berlin's 20th century history as it is for contemporary Germans to achieve consensus. Rather, the reader is left with a map and instructions on how to read it, and how to open the window of a certain building onto its history. Without saying so directly, Ladd belongs in the camp of those scholars who would argue that there is no one monolithic history, but that on the contrary "history" is constructed over and over again by different constituencies. Leaving no stone unturned, how can Ladd come to conclusions when every stone has its own life and shows up in ever-new concrete and metaphorical configurations?

Since all meanings are in flux, it therefore comes as a bit of a surprise to find Ladd making strong pronouncements about Germans and German history that echo through the whole book. Germany's position in the world today as well as its self-perception, he argues, are deeply marked by the fact that it brought about the reign of Hitler, and by the political division it endured after WWII. In case after case, Ladd points out that in this country, with this particular past, citizens can only be divided, way beyond the time of unification, because the deep distrust of oneself, the shame of Nazism, and the psychological need to repress what does not fit one's self-image—what Ladd calls the ghosts of Berlin—express themselves differently and sometimes with extreme results.

After a chapter on the wall, symptomatic for all the monuments in Berlin and also methodologically laying the groundwork for the chapters to come, Ladd moves quasi chronologically, from "Old Berlin," to "Metropolis," to "Nazi Berlin," and into the present with "Divided Berlin" and "Capital of the New Germany," but it will not surprise the reader that in these chapters he moves back and forth in time, because the ironies of history open up, at innumerable points in time, as one looks forward and backward. This makes for challenging reading, but Ladd's lucid and lively prose will help the reader through the more complicated passages. The black-and-white photos, preserving the gritty quality of much of Berlin, give evidence of what has been described and analyzed. The bibliography, as well as a nine-page timeline, are further help for those who can use a booster shot in contemporary history.

Many visitors and writers have described Berlin as a haunted city, where the memories of the Third Reich are alive and exert a sometimes paralyzing, sometimes depressing influences over the survivors and the next generations. Scholars usually shrink back from words like these, focusing instead on the hard facts, statistics, etc. Ladd does not exercise such restraint but he can back up his findings with a staggering amount of evidence on how seemingly innocent architectural decision-making is in fact influenced and often

hampered by associations with the past, such as questions about what to do with sites that were once occupied by the Nazis, or how to deal with a victory column that, in other cultures, would not be contested. He demonstrates that Berlin is a haunted city in the way consensus, decision-making and civic life in general are complicated by memories and shame over the Third Reich, whether they express themselves in the need to forget or the decision to remember. Ladd argues that what lies at the basis of many Germans' self-definition, even today, is the lingering trauma of the Third Reich. "Vergangenheitsbewältigung," the coming to terms with Germany's past in the 20th century, is still not a fact but, as Ladd would argue, wishful thinking. He is undoubtedly right in his assertion that the ghosts of Berlin still exert their influence; I only wonder if in his effort to come to terms with them, he does not overlook that other countries, even if they have an easier time commemorating their dead and their victories, also have their ghosts that will come out of the closet eventually, such as in the French government's late attempts to finally come to deal with the Algerian war. Also, it may be more obvious today than ten years ago to see situations the complexity of which, created by trauma, repression and shame, borders on hopelessness. Finally, with a generation of Germans coming of age who are more removed from the generation who lived through or participated in WWII, the national trauma has lost some of its weight, as is evident in a new wave of films and literature that is less preoccupied with the Third Reich and the Holocaust.

However, what Ladd has to say about the construction of meaning, its "translation" into cultural objects and the fight of different political and cultural representatives over these objects and their significance, remains valid and thought-provoking. His study weaves together three thematic strings: a more or less traditional history of Berlin, a history of Berlin's architecture as an expression of great men's History combined with the history of the people, and a reflection on the specific case of German history. According to Ladd, Germans' struggle with the burden of their past complicates their relationship to the architectural remnants of this history more than in other countries that manage to celebrate their monuments even if they are, from a contemporary perspective, politically questionable.

Books on the urban landscape of Berlin that appeared in the first decade of the 21st century have the advantage that much of what Ladd has described as plans for the new Berlin has either been built or discarded, the most prominent of them the buildings on Potsdamer Platz and the Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe. Karen Till, in her study *The New Berlin. Memory, Politics, Space* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) looks at the how the dreams of city planners of the nineties have come into fruition, discussing the nexus between history, contemporary politics and place, but her main focus is the impact of the Holocaust on Berlin's cityscape and the memorials built to commemorate the murdered Jews and other victims of the Third

Reich. Jennifer Jordan, in *Structures of Memory. Understanding Urban Change in Berlin and Beyond* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006) also examines the process of creating memorial sites, and asks how these kinds of transformations of urban space occur (. . .),” but she focuses more on that which is forgotten than what is remembered (p. 9).

Who will read this book? It is essential for the scholar of German history, and in particular the history of Berlin, with its rich archival material that yields intriguing insights into the cultural planning of the Third Reich, the attempts of the GDR to create, “from ruins”, as their national anthem proclaimed, a new country, the hopes and aspirations of the FRG, as well as the sometimes bitter struggle over whose Germany it was, and is, in the years following re-unification.

Furthermore, the book would be a good antidote for those who are fascinated by the paraphernalia of fascism in that it represents an alternative to what Susan Sontag described in her seminal essay, “Fascinating Fascism,” because it takes mythic places and carefully analyzes how they acquired their meaning. If nothing else the bizarre ways in which this meaning is sometimes acquired should help deconstruct their mystique. In taking apart the apparatus that created the seductive fetishes of fascist culture, Ladd is an enlightenment scholar.

Finally, *The Ghosts of Berlin* is also useful for foreign students embarking on a term in Berlin; it will help them see the sites with new and deepened understanding. I would suggest, however, that they read the book in connection with a class, since otherwise they may be overwhelmed by the complexities of the situations Ladd describes, and get lost in the details. It may be useful to take a chapter and focus on a particular era, or a part of the city. Alternately, a group of students could work together, each taking on an era or a “Kiez” (neighborhood), and then report back on the book and their impressions of the site. Ladd’s study will be a good example of, and introduction to the practice of Cultural Studies.

Sigi Leonhard
Carleton College