ARTICLE

A monument to dismantlement

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Abstract

The Palast der Republik was the parliament building of the former German Democratic Republic and an entertainment center for its people. It is currently being dismantled in a lengthy procedure that will last for a period of three years. The extended 'present' of the building's removal is the focus of this article, which examines the ways in which the building is becoming a memory as it de-materializes. Throughout the text, the monumental characteristics of the dismantlement and its physiognomy as a monument to temporality are taken into consideration.

Key words

Berlin; corporeality; materiality; memory; nostalgia; temporality.

> [Public space] is where a people's dominant ethos of self is decided, normalized and regulated. Whether a city square, plaza or piazza, or a public monument, building or landmark, or simply the landscape in which one makes one's livelihood, this is where we consummate our identity as something more than a random aggregate of individuals; this is where we objectify ourselves as a community, a civilization, a nation. But the same processes that bring forth that which is deemed normative or ideal, involve forms of censorship, denial stigma and sequestration that determine what is abnormal or abominable.
>
> (Jackson 2005:19)

REMEMBERANCE OF THINGS DISMANTLED

> The concept of the trace finds its philosophical determination in opposition to the concept of aura.

Walter Benjamin, letter to Theodor Adorno, 9 December 1938
(2006: 106)

There are two postcards depicting in two, very different, ways, the Palast der Republik (PdR). The first one (Figure 1) was designed by Palastbündnis, an organization formed in 2005 with the intention of saving PdR from demolition, and if that proved impossible, advocating its use until removal. The postcard, part of the campaign for the building's preservation, depicts the Palast as a distinctive monument of Berlin, together with (but on top of) other city landmarks such as the Brandenburg Gate, the Reichstag and the Gedächtnis Kirche. The caption on the postcard reads: 'Berlin: City with History' (Berlin: Stadt mit Geschichte). As explained to me by Jost Völker, an architect and member of Palastbündnis, it was an attempt to point out the historical value of the building, its contrasting dynamic as a distinctive landmark, as well as its potential tourist value. By juxtaposing the image of the building in question to other, well-established monuments of the city, the postcard acts as a suggestion. And by stating 'history' on top of the image, the vision of Palastbündnis becomes explicit. The postcard uses an object from the past, one that was certainly at stake at the time of its printing, in a collage that implies a most traditional postcard aesthetic (a synthesis of images of monuments) to provide an alternative vision of the city's image and thus to romance its future. It is an imaginary, not a document. And it imagines the city's present, its future and, to an extent, its past.

Figures 1 and 2 about here

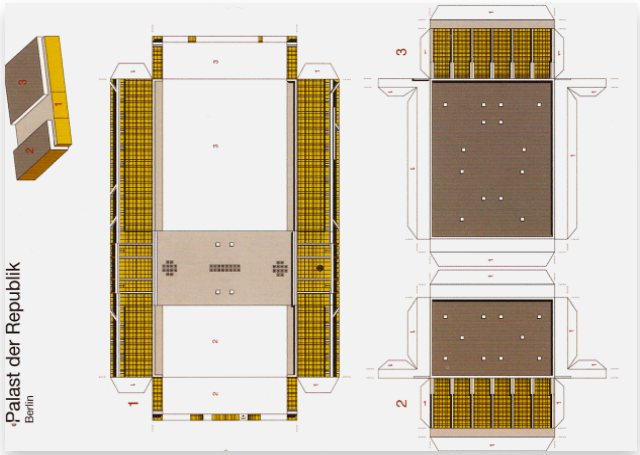

FIGURE 1
(Image courtesy of Palastbündnis)
FIGURE 2
Image courtesy of Berlinerluft

The second postcard (Figure 2) depicts a cut and fold model of the building. The very practice of cut and fold is an older fashion that survives to this day as a technique that has become a retro object, and the image of the building that the postcard depicts is also on the way to becoming an object of retro desire, within the context of what in Germany is called *Ostalgiei*.[1] The postcard is to be found in retro stores in Berlin (and most probably also elsewhere), alongside reproductions of East German and Soviet military clothes and medals.

Those two postcards depict two variations on the same theme, thereby illustrating two different visions of the past, and on a second reading, they provide two varying comprehensions of historical time. Furthermore, it is worth noting that both postcards have a prospect for the future, but the vision that each one holds for the future is precisely the point at which those postcards begin to differ

substantially. Whereas the first one uses the image of the building in order to provide a vision for the city's future, the second one draws from the kitsch character and the nostalgia that this building arouses, and creates an object for retro consumption. As the PdR is being dismantled and becomes part of the past, these postcards are becoming souvenirs of the building, and it is becoming part of their domain to maintain a share of memory of the building. As such, both postcards are (or are becoming) nostalgic objects.

The question of memory is a central one in the dialogue that broke out in the aftermath of the reunification of Germany and that will much likely go on for years to come. The discussion of the ways in which the German Democratic Republic (GDR) would pass into history and the compatibility of these ways with the means through which it would become memory has been a sensitive but rather important matter. This building, not being a metaphor for this discussion but certainly having the second half of its life parallel to it, has also provided the discussion with an object that, to an extent, materialized many aspects of the issue. Thus it has been seen as: a contagious space (because of high amounts of asbestos in its foundations), a central and unique space for innovative art (by Palastbündnis), a brilliant and refreshing contradiction to its surroundings, and an ugly and annoying contradiction to its surroundings, to name but a few.

The lengthy dismantlement of the building comprises a temporality that allows us glimpses into the ways in which this building is making its way into memory as it de-materializes and this procedure is the focus of interest of this

article. But to return to the materializations of GDR memory in the building: it was probably with such thoughts in mind that the journalist Silvia Engels, in a July 2002 interview about the fate of the building in the radio program *Interview am Morgen* asked the regional chairman of the CDU, Christopher Stolz, whether he saw the forthcoming removal of the PdR as 'a sign, that the history of German Democratic Republic is gradually going into oblivion?'[2] He answered:

> It doesn't end in oblivion, but it adjusts itself, and the memory of the dictatorship fades away. This is one. Concerning that, one can indeed be sad. But also the memory of those small delights is fading away, for the freedom in the Federal Republic offers totally different joy from the bowling track in Palast der Republik. (Stolz, 2002)

MATTER OF TIME

> We live in the era of earthquakes …
> The future is certain.
> That which is unpredictable is
> the past.
>
> (Seremetakis, 2004)

The PdR is a building on the Museuminsel in the classical center of Berlin that is currently being dismantled.[3] The removal of the building started in February 2006 and it is estimated to continue until January 2009, lasting a total of 36 months. It could perhaps be said that this deconstruction is nothing new. The very ground on

which the PdR stands seems unstable, or rather it has proved to be unstable during the course of the 20th century. What follows in this section are recollections about these grounds from the 20th century and a short part of its history in the 21st.

On the same spot in Schlossplatz (castle square), stood the Berliner Schloss before the PdR. The Berliner Schloss was a Prussian palace, the construction of which was started by Kürfürst Friedrich II in 1440. It was from one of the castle's balconies that, on 9 November 1918, the Spartacist Karl Liebknecht denounced monarchy and announced the birth of the republic: 'The Palace now belongs to the people'. The upraised people did not wait for a second call before invading a Schloss that had been closed to them for almost five centuries. A few days later, a rebel marine division occupied the building for six weeks, a period in which the building was plundered and set on fire. During the years of the Weimar Republic, what remained of the castle was used as a museum, where, among others, the German Art Association exhibited artwork. That lasted only until November 1933, however, when the Nazi regime accused the association of supporting 'degenerate art', and the German Art Association's rooms in the Schloss were instead occupied by the *Reich* Chamber of Fine Arts. The bombs at the end of the Second World War did not miss the Schloss; instead they left only partial ruins of the once monumental building.

In September 1950, the government of the GDR chose to remove the remains of the Schloss, and Schlossplatz became Marx-Engels Platz. The square was to remain empty until 1976, when the PdR was erected. It was built with the intention

of housing the meetings of the parliament while at the same time serving as a cultural center for its people: apart from the cabinet and a meeting room for the government, it hosted 13 restaurants, bars, a bowling centre, a discotheque and a huge amphitheater (*Grosser Saal*). In 1990, by the time of the reunification of Germany, the doors of the PdR had been shut to the public and to its employees as a result of a report concerning the potential dangers from the high levels of asbestos in the building. However, instead of removing the contagious building as a whole, it was decided that the asbestos alone could and should be removed, a procedure that began in 1998 and ended in 2002. The procedure led to the removal of most of the building's interiors and reduced it to its steel skeleton and external walls, an empty dark ruin for which no use could be found. Thus discussions about its removal began anew. The parliament decided on the rebuilding of Berliner Schloss in July 2002, and in November 2003 voted for the removal of the PdR. At this point, a group of artists and architects managed to gain entrance to the PdR and got permission to use its interiors for exhibitions, theatrical performances and concerts, which they did for almost two years. Yet the decision to remove it was reaffirmed in the form of the rejection of a motion proposed in parliament to maintain PdR on 19 January 2006. Located on such unstable grounds, it can perhaps be said that the removal of this building was but a matter of time.

A TEMPORAL MONUMENT

Something that could be just a momentary explosion in the imaginary realms of television takes a rather more extended period of time in the case of the removal of

PdR. Instead of a dirty, noisy demolition, the procedure of dismantlement has been advanced as the safest and wisest choice for the building's removal. The procedure, as stated above, will last, according to the latest estimates, a period of 36 months. However, when saying that the dismantlement will last a long time, one should not merely think in terms of the actual period of three years, but also the amplification of this that is generated by the spot in which the dismantlement takes place, that is, the city center. The period for which this removal has been going on has made the fact of the removal impossible to disguise. Thus, the strategy employed by the Senatsverwaltung für Staatsentwinklung (Senate Department for Urban Development of Berlin - SDUDB) has been that of an entirely open dismantlement, surrounded by a temporal explanatory exhibition. Nevertheless, what has perhaps been designed as a temporal monument has turned out to be a monument to temporality.

The exhibition comprises a series of banners that provide a history of the place: two declarations about the removal ('A Democratic Decision', 'Dismantling, not Demolishing: Good for the Environment and the City'); one declaration explaining what PdR was ('Palace of the Republic: East Germany Asserts its Legitimacy'); and one that announces the rebuilding of the Berliner Schloss, reading 'Berlin's Historical City Center: On its way to a Distinctive New Shape', accompanied by a photograph of the Schloss Platz from the beginning of the century, and thus giving a distinctive if grainy image of what the future will be like. This is the most important achievement of the exhibition to position the present

removal in a historical context, in a timeline that has a specific past and a specific future.

In addition to these banners, a viewing platform[4] has been positioned in front of the PdR, so that one can step onto it and watch the dismantlement from a wider angle, undisturbed by the surrounding fence. The nearby Deutsches Historisches Museum has positioned a web camera on its roof that takes an image every minute and is directly connected to the museum's website,[5] providing a sort of live coverage of the event and an even wider *viewing platform*. Viewing platforms have been widely used in construction sites in Berlin (as in the lengthy building of the Holocaust Memorial). The platforms on building sites are important in that they help to give an impression and perception of the whole, as opposed to long and fragmented construction procedures. We can imagine that the placement of a viewing platform in front of a deconstruction site does not have a very different context; it is functioning as a medium for making it possible to conceive the fragmentary as a whole, only in this case, in the center of the procedure is absence rather than presence. The viewing platform thus brings closer the two procedures (construction/deconstruction) that otherwise may seem so different from one another. The meeting of these two procedures should not to be glossed over lightheartedly: listen to Mikhail Yampolsky, who, in echoing Benjamin's dictum about history being written by the victors, points out the symbolic (dialectic) capacity of monument demolition (1995: 100): 'Destruction and construction can be understood, in a certain context, as two equally valid procedures of immortalization.

Destruction affirms the power of the victor to the same extent as the erection of a monument to victory.' But, perhaps the most important function of the *viewing platform* is that it frames the procedure. Through the camera, the platform, and also the documenting of the dismantlement by artists such as the painter Tobias Mannewitz, the very procedure of deconstruction gains a monumental character.

The dismantlement of a monument becomes a monument in itself. One cannot oversee the effect that the removal has in the center of the city, just as one cannot oversee the removal itself. The most important aspect of the monumental character of the removal is that it helps the inhabitants of the city as well as the city itself, to become accustomed to its removal by being in everyday contact with it for such an extended period of time. It is not a wonder anymore; it is a reality. It is the reality of change, and what it primarily affirms is the building's removal. The building at the end of the procedure will not have magically disappeared; on the contrary, it will have slowly been removed in a process that suggests a resemblance to history itself.

When considering the dismantlement procedure of the PdR, which is roughly the mirror image of its building what was built last is to be taken away first and so on and the consequent rebuilding of the Berliner Schloss, one is tempted to think of it as *history in rewind*. But that might not be quite accurate as a metaphor, for the new building will not be a copy of Schloss itself, but rather only a reproduction of its façade. Inside, the space will be redesigned and according to plans will house top-

class hotels and restaurants, the Humboldt forum area for exhibitions, and shopping centers. It is the space of appearances.

HISTORY, INNOVATION, AND THE METROPOLIS: A WEIMAR INTERLUDE

> Time does not always flow according to a line … nor according to a plan but, rather, according to an extraordinary complex mixture, as though it reflected stopping points, ruptures, deep wells, chimneys or thunderous acceleration, rendings, gaps all sown at random, at least in a visible disorder.
>
> Michael Serres, *Conversations on Time* (1995: 57)

The concept of what modern is appears to have been a matter of great importance among German thinkers during the period that came to be on the brink of what we refer to as modern times. In several cases, innovation has been considered in accordance with the modern metropolis, which in many senses appeared to be the natural place for it to occur. At the turn of the 20th century, the metropolis and the understanding of the ways in which the city is shaped came to be an object of innovative study in its own right. At that time, and while the Berliner Schloss was still a pretty solid Berlin monument, Georg Simmel writes that 'The Metropolis reveals itself as one of those great historical formations in which opposing streams that enclose life unfold, as well as join one another with equal right' (1997: 185). Thinkers at the time of the Weimar Republic would attempt to consider what 'reveals' means here. The study of the city will gradually transcend its appearances without ignoring them, though: 'an understanding of this city [Berlin] depends on an ability to decipher the dreamlike images it generates ... its contradictions and

contrasts, its toughness, its openness, its juxtapositions and simultaneity, its lustre.' (Kracauer, 1987: 41[6]) Walter Benjamin starts by considering the physiognomic aspects of the city and sees in it a museum. His studies on the flâneur will drive him to a city in which history breathes even in its most obscure corners or, especially there. The imaginations of the city about its past and its future will find their way into his writings on the city's character. Time and again, the obscure era that was to follow the time of Weimar brings the concepts of innovation and modern under serious scrutiny, as the concepts of the *old* and the *new* gain a renowned political meaning. Perhaps this is better stated by Bertolt Brecht when he warns his readers against the use of the new in disguising the old; he writes in the foreword of the *Life of Galileo:* 'In those days the conception of the new is itself falsified. The Old and the Very Old, now re-entering the arena, proclaim themselves as new, or else it is held to be new when the Old or the Very Old are put over in a new way' (1980: 116) The ways in which history moves are being critically treated and the supposedly self-evident relations between the notions of history, future and progress are utterly damaged.

In November 2005, Manfred Stolpe, the Federal Minister for Transport, Housing and Construction at that time, was interviewed for the *Tagesspiegel* newspaper on the removal of the PdR and the rebuilding of the Schloss. He said: 'Whoever asks for it [the moratorium of Palast removal], wants the standstill. Therefore, this is the wrong way … At some point the Palast must be demolished, because it is not possible to keep it permanently technically and aesthetically'

(Stolpe, 2005). Stolpe's words most vividly illustrate a perfectly linear understanding of time, where there can only be delays to the future that is coming anyway. Such an understanding of historical time certainly affords moral judgments to be made around its axis. According to this understanding, there can be a *wrong* way to deal with time, which is holding back progress. To this view, I think it is worth juxtaposing Walter Benjamin's view on progress, his meditations on Paul Klee's picture 'Angelus Novus' juxtaposition that also has interesting imagery aspects, when one thinks of the piles of rubble that are growing in the dismantlement site of the PdR (2006: 392).

> Klee's picture 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls them at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows towards the sky. This storm is what we call progress.

OSTALGIE

The banner 'Palast der Republic: East Germany Asserts its Legitimacy' has a twofold function. It explains to anyone interested what the building that is being removed is, but it also gives a clue as to *why* it is being removed to the extent that it states *as what* the building is being dismantled. With this identity, an assertion of GDR's legitimacy, stated and stamped on it, probably by the time that these lines are printed, it will have been removed. Perhaps as such, as a political symbol of the East German Republic, it will be remembered and commemorated by the Federal German state this being not very far from the original purpose for which it was built a government building that would also function as a cultural center for the people of the GDR. However, this is not necessarily the way in which this building is being remembered by people who have used its interiors,[7] in discussions with whom it is often commemorated as a center for popular entertainment, and only secondarily (if at all) as a government building. A vivid illustration of such a diverse remembrance of the building comes from a discussion in a café with Franziska and Antja's teenagers at the time of reunification. When I mention its character as a political building, Franziska recalls: 'Indeed, now that you mention it I remember, there was a TV broadcast from the parliament, and my mother told me that they were right then in Palast der Republik … Before I hadn't connect it with (the building) … with the glitter, the lights …'. Her friend Anje went on to explain this *glitter*:

> Everything shone, it was such a … castle … as one imagines castles in fairytales … with curtains hanging and those huge staircases with carpets and everything neat, carpeted and tiled

> floors. And everything really cute … Like a fairytale. In the overall context of the GDR, [in] the dream of peace, 'we have peace, we have harmony, we have jobs for everybody, each day we let doves of peace fly'. This idea, this dream, was for us reality; we didn't know that it was an illusion and that the GDR had less and less money for such luxuries. We had believed that we could all be cosmonauts and that all the nations would become socialistic and that all people would love each other and there will be work for everybody; we had utterly believed that. And the Palast der Republik was the castle for this dream.

These views are rather personal comprehensions of the nature of this building. Thus they result in a memory of the building that overlooks its function as a government building and also, in this case, its bowling alley. Such remembrance of place is what Marc Auge (2000: 56) considers to be personalized ideas of place, which might be 'partial or mythologized' and perhaps result in the ambiguous intellectual status of anthropological place. Such ways of remembering a building, however critical or self-reflexive they might be, are nostalgic. In addition, such memories can also include those small delights, which, according to Christopher Stolz, will fade away with the passing of time; for the freedom in the Federal Republic offers a totally different joy. The idea that progress cures nostalgia is not a new one. It can be traced back as far as in the mid-17th century:

> Happily Nostalgia diminishes day by day; by descending little by little among the masses, instruction will develop the intelligence of people, making them more and more capable of

> struggling against the disease. Everything that touches civilization, in perfecting the human species, makes man understand his role as an individual, his part in the common work, and, in enlightening his spirit, submits the impulses of his heart to reason. (Morin, 1856, cited in Roth, 1992: 278)

Since the 15th century, nostalgia has been considered a disease, and it was medically treated as such (Roth, 1992). However, starting in the mid-17th century, science seems to lose its interest in nostalgia as disease, holding an optimism that civilization will drive the disease to disappear. Ever since, the persistent nostalgia has gradually come to be considered a state of mind that implies a frozen moment in time, out of touch with the present, to which one may yield. *But*, the work of Nadia Seremetakis on the memory of the senses has stretched the idea of nostalgia out of the fixed shape that is implied in (the American use of) the term, which implies a 'trivializing romantic sentimentality', and under which the past becomes an isolatable and consumable unit of time. To this, by employing the etymology of the Greek word *nostalghia* (Νοσταλγία) Seremetakis counterpoises the notion of a sensual memory, a sensory reception of history that suggests motion instead of stability. She writes that, 'nostalgia, in the American sense, freezes the past in such a manner as to preclude it from any capacity for social transformation in the present … Whereas the Greek etymology evokes the transformative impact of the past as unreconciled historical experience' (1994: 4). Time passes; nostalgia and *nostalghia*, I think as I twist the two postcards around my fingers.

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The present text, if not my thought in general, would have been much poorer if it wasn't for discussions with such fascinating people as Daniel Reichelt, Irit Dekel, Sean Foley, Michalis Kontopodis, Dafni Sofianopoulou and Antonis Pitsios.

Notes

1The term *Ostalgie* is a neologism that combines the words 'Ost' (East) and 'Nostalgia'. It is used to describe a yield to the era of the GDR. What is interesting is the employment of a geographical determination to describe a *movement* in time. A comprehensive account of the notion Ostalgie is provided by Katja Neller in her book *DDR-Nostalgie*(2006). A critical encounter with the term is also to be found in Svetlana Boym's *The future of Nostalgia* (2001). The blurring of the limits of time/space that the term *Ostalgie* suggests brings to mind a sentence from L.P. Hartley' novel *The Go-Between*: 'The past is a foreign country, they do things differently there.' Tim Ingold, writing about the death of ethnographic present, thinks these words 'strike at the heart of the problem: that to replace the ethnographic present as a convention for describing the life of other people, we have to think again about the ways in which we understand the past in our own lives' (Ingold, 2001: 201).

2 Unless otherwise stated, all the translations from German are mine.

3 *Museumsinsel*: Island of Museums. This is a small island on the Spree River on which a number of museums are located, including the Altes Museum, the Bodemuseum and the renowned Pergamon Museum.

4 In German *Schaustelle*, which is also the title of the exhibition.

5 http://www.dhm.de/webcams/WEB1.html.

6 Translated from German by Allan Cochrane and Andrew Jonas (1999: 145)

7 This is one outcome of ethnographic research that I've conducted among citizens of the former GDR, during 2006-07. This view, that the building has been primarily used as an entertainment center rather than a government building, is parallel to those expressed by Brian Ladd (2002: 93), Allan Cochrane and Andrew Jonas (1999: 153). A similar view is expressed by Herbert Marcuse: 'It contained nine theaters, multiple restaurants and the legislative, but not the executive of or party, organs of the state and was ... quite a popular and accessible building to the people of East Berlin' (1998: 335).

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