

MEMORY, AMNESIA and urbanISM

EDITORIAL In Berlin the physical deconstruction of the former parliament building of the GDR, the “Palast der Republik” is well underway. The deconstruction is a highly charged, symbolic act of wiping out memory of a sunken state, now reunified into one Germany. A prolonged struggle over memorialization has come to its material end. This particular debate, as it is often the case with the big monuments reached well beyond the City of Berlin.

If we take the French philosopher Ernest Renan at his word the decision makes perfect sense. Writing in 1882 he framed the role of memory in nation-making. “Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation. The essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common and also that they have forgotten many things.”

At the level of the city the relationship between urbanism and memory are questions that linger. Not in the least because they have a concrete durable physical dimension. From the highbrow - the buildings that represent the state all the way to the palimpsest of graffiti tags on walls. How are memories constructed, embedded or deleted? Why and how are some preserved at high cost while others are sacrificed with nary a backward glance? Lest a city wants to become a ghost town or an open-air museum, history will constantly be layered, merged and replaced by new memories and stories. But when does intentional forgetting develop into something close to amnesia and becomes detrimental?

This issue of *mudot* sets out to explore some of these questions. Using the concepts of memory and amnesia we framed these processes in terms that have parallels to the study of the human mind.

Could the rapid change of time-lapse urbanization and the wave of sudden destruction that it rides on constitute something that psychologists would call anterograde amnesia - the failure to encode anything in the present, after the onset of the traumatic event? Or if we take the memory of a city to be somehow represented in both the physical (i.e., buildings and streets), as well as the cumulative knowledge and storytelling by its inhabitants -- what happens if this symmetry is disrupted? For example what happens if those who knew the stories about a place disappear but the buildings remain? What if the building itself disappears? Does the city become a patient with retrograde amnesia, having lost access to the memory of the past, while the artefacts that constitute memory are still there, but senselessly connected?

Of course such metaphorical thinking can only be a heuristic. After all cities are not really like brains: the former don't have dopamine and the latter don't know real-estate speculators.

But as a heuristic it seems to have been fruitful. In this issue of *mudot* we present a fine collection of essays that tackle the challenging terrain of memory, amnesia and urbanism. Our geographic coverage is truly global this time (well almost): The disappearing of an 80's discotheque in Berlin [16/17/18/19] or the demolition of it's old GDR parliament building [26/27/28/29], the rapid transformation of Beijing [46/47/48], New York [32/33] or Beirut [20/21], the ironic history of planning in modern Tehran [10/11/12/13/14/15], the lack of nostalgia in Palermo [40/41/42/43/44/45] or an exercise in nostalgic remembering in Venice [70/71/72/73/74] or Seoul [34/35/36/37/38/39], or a trip through Havana [30/31] to name but a few. We even sponsored our own small intervention last September in Cologne where we tried to figure out what are the place memories people have, what specific associations are significant and what questions still remain [66/67/68/69].

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