



## (Non-)Monumental Layers of Berlin

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### Abstract

The two books reviewed in this article, Hsiu-Ling Kuos's *Monumentality and Modernity in Hitler's Berlin* (2013) and Janet Ward's *Post-Wall Berlin* (2011), focus on the structural, political, social and aesthetic transformation of Berlin, from the first half of the twentieth century to the 'post-wall' era. Since both authors strongly emphasize the former and present status of monumental architecture and monumental memory, this book review pays particular attention to a critical discussion of the (non-)monumental layers of Berlin.

**Keywords:** architecture, Berlin, memory, modernity, monumentality

Review of: Hsiu-Ling Kuo, *Monumentality and Modernity in Hitler's Berlin. The North-South Axis of the Greater Berlin Plan* (Oxford, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Vienna: Peter Lang, 2013); *German Linguistic and Cultural Studies*, vol. 28, 243 pp., ISBN: 978-3-0343-0755-0; Janet Ward, *Post-Wall Berlin. Borders, Space and Identity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), ISBN: 978-0-230-27657-4.

### Introduction

When discussing the cultural history of modern Berlin, there are a number of studies that focus on the everyday dimensions of the city. Thomas

Lindenberger looks at Berlin from the street.<sup>1</sup> Peter Fritzsche analyzes a variety of sites from modern transportation vehicles to sport stadiums.<sup>2</sup> Pamela Swett's research is set in the working-class neighbourhood.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to these examples, the point of departure of historian Hsiu-Ling Kuo's *Monumentality and Modernity in Hitler's Berlin. The North-South Axis of the Greater Berlin Plan* (2013) is radically different: she investigates the urban modernity of Berlin from a monumental perspective. This book review will, therefore, pay particular attention to the critical discussion of the monumental layers of Berlin. At the same time, the review is not restricted to the examination of modern times; it broadens its temporal framework to present-day Berlin. While historian Janet Ward's *Post-Wall Berlin. Borders, Space and Identity* (2011) fits into the series of current studies concentrating on the Berlin Wall,<sup>4</sup> it also serves as a suitable counterpart of Kuo's monograph. On the one hand, reading together the two books offers the possibility to study the transformation of Berlin from the first half of the twentieth century to the 'post-wall' era. On the other hand, Ward's discussion of monumental memory enables meditations on the former, as well as the present status of monumentality.

## Modern Monumentalities

In *Monumentality and Modernity in Hitler's Berlin*, Hsiu-Ling Kuo studies the complex relationship between modernism and National Socialism through their architecture, and argues for the re-inclusion of National Socialist planning into the broader history of architecture. As she claims, '... National Socialist architecture has commonly been excluded in the history of modern architecture. Critics and historians of German Studies ... regarded National Socialist architecture and Nazism as a historical aberration, a mutation totally outside the development of modernity. ... However, it is by no means an independent and separate architectural genre in history'.<sup>5</sup> In order to show how National Socialist architecture is embedded within the architectural trends of modernity, Kuo examines a variety of architectural debates, and compares several modernist architectural designs with the plan of *Welthauptstadt Germania*. It will be evident that her interest does not lie solely in the political aspect of architecture. Her explicit aim is to

focus also on the social and aesthetic dimensions of structural design.<sup>6</sup> Kuo thus opens her book with a chapter on ‘Modernist Architecture and National Socialism’ that looks at both Nazi and modernist interpretations of architectural history. She convincingly shows that the two historiographies generally have been mutually exclusive, and that present analyses – apart from exceptions such as Barbara Miller Lane or Vittorio Magnano Lampugnani – still follow the modernist approach. In this sense, the motivation for Kuo’s book is well-founded, but it would have been beneficial if she had also contextualized her argument. Even though Kuo dedicates a few pages to postmodern critical theory that is widely suspicious of the notion of modernity,<sup>7</sup> she fails to take into account some of the essential works that elaborate on the relationship of modernity to the Holocaust. Building a connection between her argument and theoretical works such as Zygmunt Bauman’s *Modernity and the Holocaust*<sup>8</sup> – that likewise challenges the once conventional view that saw the Holocaust as an anomaly within modernity – would have offered a more comprehensive background for her analysis.

While investigating the mutual reception of totalitarian and modern architecture, the first chapter of Kuo’s book also evokes post-war debates in which architects and historians tried to clarify to which extent monumentality was a feature of totalitarian political ideologies, and to which extent it was a legitimate concept for general architectural visions. The survey incorporates various attitudes from regarding monumentality as essentially anti-democratic (e.g. Gregor Paulsson), through emphasizing a more sober and formalistic evaluation (e.g. Henry-Russell Hitchcock), to the highly positive understandings of it (e.g. Alfred Roth). Although very interesting, this discussion of monumentality seems to rush forward a bit, especially since the second chapter on ‘The Discourse of Monumentality Before 1933’ steps back in time and focuses on the emergence of the ‘monumental tradition’.<sup>9</sup> Kuo brings together various definitions of the ‘monumental’, a concept which, besides having a commemorative connotation, has traditionally been associated with greater dimensions, permanence and communal values. At the same time, the author also traces the roots of ‘monumentomania’,<sup>10</sup> and links the obsession with monumentality to the emergence of insecurity. As she argues, ‘while monumentality was a recurring theme for architecture in the late nineteenth century, the phenomenon of monumentomania can be traced back to the Wilhelmine

era – a consequence of an insecure nation struggling to assert itself on the world stage ...’.<sup>11</sup> Monumentality, thus, becomes also identical with the mediation of (illusory) power and order.

The same chapter, then, returns to the comparison of modernist and National Socialist visions of monumentality showing that the two tendencies were closer to each other than they (wish to) acknowledge. While some of the modernist statements of the illustrative *Nine Points on Monumentality* by Leger, Sert and Giedion (1943) echo National Socialist ideology, several leading architects of the Greater Berlin project such as Behrens, Kreis, Poelzig or Tessenow were also connected to the modernist movement of expressionism. Partly repeating the contradictory post-1945 reception of monumentality presented in the first chapter, the second chapter leaves open the current status of monumentality – a question that is more thoroughly answered by Janet Ward –, and Kuo continues with the analysis of Berlin’s several redevelopment plans.

After these two – more theoretical – chapters, the subsequent parts of the book are dedicated to specific case studies further underlining the continuity of National Socialist architecture with modernity. In Chapter 3 (‘Reshaping Berlin: The Metropolis and Urban Planning in the Early Twentieth Century’) Kuo elaborates on the transformation of Berlin into a modern world city. She takes into account the problems in the old Berlin of the 1900s (traffic circulation, shortage of goods, hygienic urban housing and sanitation), refers to the models of modern German urban planners (the Viennese *Ringstrasse*, the Parisian boulevard, the London underground system, American high-rise buildings, and some of the utopian plans such as Ebenezer Howard’s Garden City), and discusses the suggestions for restructuring Berlin as a *Weltstadt*. Martin Mächler’s 1908/1917/1919 design with a clear north-south oriented axis, Ludwig Hilbersheimer’s plan, dating from 1924, of a skyscraper city along with self-contained buildings and a multi-level traffic system, or Martin Wagner’s idea, forwarded in 1929, to turn Berlin into a spectacle dedicated to traffic circulation and shopping are all cases in point.

Strongly connected to this section, Chapter 4 (‘Monumentality and Major Projects on the North-South Axis’) and Chapter 5 (‘Private Commissions and Monumental Constructions on the North-South Axis’) continue the analysis of monumental redevelopment plans, however,

now of a Berlin that is envisioned to become Germania, the new capital of the German Empire. Focusing on major projects of the north-south axis of Albert Speer's plan (Great Hall, Soldier's Hall, Triumphal Arch, Supreme Command of Army, North and South Railway Station, AEG Administration Building, Agfa Administrative Building, Allianz Administration Building, The Grand Hotel Project), Kuo identifies the Neo-classical style and Speer's ruin theory as themes underpinning the planned buildings. However, she also shows to what extent National Socialist architecture reflected modernist architectural solutions. While in Kuo's understanding the idea of the axis already demonstrates a close link with modernist planning (see the Mächler plan), building designs – as she effectively proves – were variously influenced by modern architecture. The Great Hall corresponded to a focal point often applied in modern city planning, the AEG Administration Building mirrored modernist functionality, and the Supreme Command of the Army echoed modernist debates on the high-rise buildings.

At the same time, while indeed successfully revealing the correlation between modern and National Socialist architecture, Kuo's – sometimes loosely structured – analysis becomes exclusively focused on similarities. Her statement that the vision of Germania 'created the height of monumentality, which is unique in every sense',<sup>12</sup> not only comes as a surprise after her continuous emphasis on correspondences, but it also remains unsupported. This sense of uniqueness could have been brought back – not even contradicting her thesis about continuities – if she had indeed had a triple focus on social, aesthetic *and* political aspects of architecture as she promised in the introduction. Yet, the political dimensions remain rather underexposed, and neither does this change with the far too short last chapter that tries to reintroduce the issue of politics ('Architecture and the Mass Psychology of Monumentality'). This criticism is further supported by the third part of Janet Ward's book where she likewise takes into account numerous redevelopment plans of Berlin. While very much propagating the thesis of continuity,<sup>13</sup> Ward regards politics as a distinctive element in National Socialist planning. Instead of interpreting Mächler's axis plan as proto-Nazi, she argues for its understanding as pre-Nazi.<sup>14</sup> Moreover she also stresses the fact that '... the Nazi regime adopted modern Weimar models of planning urban flow, but then applied them in the service of new goals. Clearly, the Nazis took up radial axiality for their

own purposes, making Berlin's lines of power into highly politicized entities'.<sup>15</sup> In spite of this imbalance in her approach, Hsiu-Ling Kuo does an important job: reflecting on the (dis)continuities between the two eras is still of the uttermost importance.

## Berlin Paradigm

Similarly to Kuo, Janet Ward's *Post-Wall Berlin* creates various links between Weimar and Nazi planning; however, broadening her scope of study, she also incorporates the post-war and post-wall phases into her analysis. While focusing on the latter, Ward's primary interest lies in the concept of the border: she discusses the de- and reterritorialization of Berlin through the changing physical and symbolic significance of borders, particularly the Berlin Wall. Since for Ward borders are the material or immaterial manifestations of a multi-faceted question, her main goal is to offer a cross-disciplinary analysis, in which the problem of borders is reflected from various fields such as 'anthropology, architectural and art history, economics, geography, history, literary and cultural criticism, planning, political science, and sociology, as well as post-socialist studies'.<sup>16</sup> This all-encompassing approach, as Ward argues, is the most appropriate tool to come closest to the lived experience of a city.<sup>17</sup> The topicality of this issue is beyond doubt: besides the already cited books on the Berlin Wall, the notion of border is widely discussed in various forums. From Richard Sennett's book, *Together* (2013)<sup>18</sup> (where borders are seen as active and fruitful zones for togetherness) through the Getty Center's latest conference, *New Walled Order* (that focused on the aesthetics and politics of barriers) to the Tate Modern's recent event, 'Borders' (that meditated on how to conceive the borders of the future citizen), nowadays 'borders' seem to trigger much excitement in the academic and artistic field.

The point of departure for Janet Ward in *Post-Wall Berlin* is, thus, the border as such. However, instead of using the concept in a static sense, Ward defines borders as being dynamic. As she states,

borders that necessarily define our spaces and our places – whether urban, regional, or national, as well as the culturally and ethnically diverse groups who live there – can best be understood not just as a hegemonically linked

set of containers, but rather as a series of re-defining, impermanent, and reciprocal engagements between structure and disintegration, stasis and movement, barrier and gateway.<sup>19</sup>

Closely corresponding to Sennett's interpretation in *Together*, Ward sees the border as a 'point of creativity' where something is constantly about to change or happen.<sup>20</sup> The first part of *Post-Wall Berlin* ('Introduction: Berlin and the Bordered Condition'), while establishing the theoretical framework for the whole book, immediately connects this position to the theoretical results of the spatial turn – most importantly, in the works of Michel Foucault, Henry Lefebvre or Edward W. Soja. Thus, when the three subchapters of the first part offer a historical overview of the changing function of borders from medieval times (such as medieval city walls) to recent EU policies (such as the Schengen agreement), the discussion is as much about the various, simultaneously present and constantly shifting tendencies through which borders dissolve (globalization, the internet), or, on the contrary, are strengthened (e.g. the measures taken after 9/11). Within these general tendencies, Berlin emerges as a special case study.

Berlin's experience as a divided city reaches back as far as its establishment in 1307 as a medieval double-city (Berlin-Cölln), however – as Ward accurately shows – walls have played an essential role throughout the entire history of Berlin. The historic city wall of Berlin, the 1737 installation of the Berlin Customs Wall, and finally the 1961 erection of the Berlin Wall all add to Berlin's 'frontier city legacy'.<sup>21</sup> Based on this expertise in self-division, Ward even introduces the notion of a so-called 'Berlin paradigm' that refers precisely to the varying formation and bordering of a space.

The Berlin paradigm gets further expounded and exemplified in the second part of Ward's book ('Afterlives of the Wall: Reflections and Deflections'), in which she extensively analyzes how the nonhuman Berlin Wall and humans around the Wall mutually shape(d) each other. This point becomes nicely illustrated in the contradictory interpretation of the Wall by West Berlin as a frontier of freedom (see Kennedy's 1963 speech<sup>22</sup>), and by East Berlin as an Antifascist Defense Rampart,<sup>23</sup> determining the self-images of both West Berlin and East Berlin citizens. At the same time, as Ward argues, the Wall not only functioned as a dynamic site of projecting ideologies and identities, the wall itself

was in a constant phase of (re-)formation. ‘The Wall came into existence in the first place, and then its course and design kept changing in response to escape attempts, border re-contouring deals with the West, and simply because it literally could not stay erect as planned, but kept falling down’.<sup>24</sup> Expanding on the theoretical approach introduced in the first part of *Post-Wall Berlin*, Janet Ward, thus, focuses on different agencies around *and* of the Wall. Yet, she also takes the discussion one step further. Ward emphasizes the importance of taking into account both top-down and bottom-up processes, as well as the interaction between the two. As she states, it is the coexistence of ‘multiple, bottom-up imperfections’ with the ‘top-down ideological drive toward a closed perfectibility’ that compose and shape the Wall transforming it into a ‘flow architecture’ or a ‘breathing membrane’.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, in spite of being one of the most exciting points in her book, in the later sections, Janet Ward seems to lose this parallel and balanced focus on practices from below and from above.

## **Towards a Critical Monumentality**

The second part of *Post-Wall Berlin* continues with the analysis of the status and role of the remaining pieces and memories of the Wall after 1989, however, from Chapter 5 (‘Post-Wall Resurrections’) Ward’s investigation becomes rather subjective, which at times does not benefit her arguments. Janet Ward is highly critical about the post-1989 developments of Berlin, and this criticism occasionally leads her to draw biased conclusions. The central problem for Ward is the covering up and the disappearance of the traces of the Wall. She is clearly upset about the vast number of unprotected and unrecognized Wall remnants across Berlin, the demolition of original border checkpoints, and the Wall Memorial at Bernauer Strasse, which is, according to Ward, more an architectural commentary on the Wall than its actual commemoration. However, while her main concern is indeed the gradual obliteration of the Wall after 1989 in Berlin, Ward’s criticism also touches upon questions of monumentality. Discussing the various Berlin Wall festivities in Berlin, Ward scrutinizes two events from 2009: the twentieth anniversary of the German Day of Unity on October 3rd, and of the fall of the Wall on November 9th. Within the framework of the former, huge

puppets enacted a ‘Fairy Tale for Berlin’, whereas in the case of the latter 1000 gigantic dominoes were lined up and then toppled down along a 1.2 km-long route, from Checkpoint Charlie to the Reichstag. Ward condemns these projects not only because of the absence of the actual pieces of the Wall from the commemorations, but also because of the ‘giant’<sup>26</sup> size and exaggerated scale of the events. These critiques are, to some extent, certainly justified and defensible; however, the subjects against which these criticisms are directed represent only one side of Berlin, which Ward – theoretically – likewise seems to acknowledge.

Counter-pointing these monumental memorial projects, Ward closes the second part of her book with a chapter on ‘Alternative Border Zones in Berlin’ that is dedicated to the discussion of unofficial and unplanned cultural productions. Yet, regrettably, these examples likewise get discredited and delegitimized during her analysis. According to Ward, the expansion of bottom-up projects in Berlin (see the various squats, the practice of the so-called *Zwischennutzung*, the temporary usage of a space, and the strong presence of alternative culture throughout Berlin) is only due to the catastrophic financial situation of Berlin, a ‘case of creativity born out of sheer necessity’.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, she suggests, ‘we would ... be wise to avoid too celebratory an air concerning the derelict spaces of Berlin; such caution has to do, somewhat perversely, with their very marketability. ... Hence what Berlin boasts is more a gloss or veneer of spontaneous and free urban terrain, rather than its actuality’.<sup>28</sup> Devaluing alternative commemorations of the Wall, the previously mentioned projects remain without any (powerful) counter-voice. But strong counter-voices do exist: for instance, Karla Sachse’s 1999 work of the *Rabbit Field* (silhouettes of 20 life-size inlaid rabbits marking the area of the former in-between zone at Chausseestrasse) or let alone, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall when the city installed and then released ca. 8000 white balloons (each placed on a 3.6 m pole matching the height of the original wall and stretching for 15 km long) all suggest a (non-monumental) narrative different from that of Ward.

With the intermezzo of the previously cited third part (‘German Geomancy: Power and Planning in Germany’) that examines the various urban re-development plans of Berlin in the Weimar, Nazi, postwar and post-wall periods, both the fourth and fifth part of Ward’s book continue with the critical discussion of post-Wall Berlin. While the ninth

chapter in the third part ('Re-Centering Postwar and Post-Wall Berlin') focuses on the various efforts of how to reconnect divided Berlin (see for example the project of the *Spreebogen*, or the establishment of the *Hauptbahnhof*), the fourth part ('Holocaust Divides: Memorial Architecture in Berlin') discusses how the architectural memory of the Holocaust contributes to new connectivities within the city. At first sight, Ward tries to keep a balance between negative and positive examples; however, her analysis of Eisenman's Holocaust Memorial is so sarcastic that it almost suppresses her appraisal of Libeskind's Jewish Museum. But again, in Ward's evaluation, aspects of monumentality return: while the Holocaust Memorial is explicitly opposed to the tradition of counter-monuments that are the innovative and dialectical forms of classical memorials, the Jewish Museum is open to it. In a similar vein, the concluding section of Ward's book ('Rebranding Berlin: Global City Strategies for the Twenty-First Century') seesaws between two poles. While the 'Americanization' of the new Berlin is regarded as a clear-cut failure of monumental projects (most strikingly at the Potsdamer Platz) leading to the problem of overproduction, and, as a consequence, to bankruptcy in Berlin, the book does end with the optimistic vision of Berlin's success in its virtual image-building and self-staging. Thus, Ward ultimately leaves open the question of what Berlin will really become, but her sometimes extreme valuation of 'good' and 'bad' remain too central for the reader. The monumental' – as literary theorist Andreas Huyssen aptly argued in his paper 'Monumental Seduction' –

is aesthetically suspect because it is tied to nineteenth-century bad taste, to kitsch, and to mass culture. It is politically suspect because it is seen as representative of nineteenth-century nationalisms and of twentieth-century totalitarianisms. It is socially suspect because it is the privileged mode of expression of mass movements and mass politics. It is ethically suspect because in its preference for bigness it indulges in the larger-than-human, in the attempt to overwhelm the individual spectator. It is psychoanalytically suspect because it is tied to narcissistic delusions of grandeur and to imaginary wholeness.<sup>29</sup>

Maybe if this – otherwise plausible – suspicion had not distracted Janet Ward's analysis, she could have offered a more 'polyphonic'

examination of the Berlin scene. Besides her understandable criticism, tendencies towards self-reflexive monumentality, or even towards non-monumentality in Berlin indeed deserve much greater emphasis.

## Conclusion

All in all, Hsiu-Ling Kuo's *Monumentality and Modernity in Hitler's Berlin* and Janet Ward's *Post-Wall Berlin* demonstrate the structural, political, social and aesthetic redefinition of Berlin from modern to contemporary times, as well as the city's transfiguration into a virtual entity. Does this journey, then, also mean a radical shift from monumentality to self-reflexive monumentality and non-monumentality in the urban history of Berlin? As Huysen showed apropos of Christo's project of wrapping the Reichstag, or as the above-mentioned counter-monuments suggest, in twenty-first-century Berlin reinterpreted forms of monumentality increasingly came into the limelight. Yet, even though self-reflexive monumentality and non-monumentality seem especially adequate for Berlin's self-commemoration, this kind of practice of urban interventions is not entirely new. The Situationist International or the avant-garde movement of Fluxus already introduced some of the methods of how to transform the material environment in a critical way. In this sense, redefined forms of monumentality can – and should – be also re-inscribed into the history of modernity.

## Notes

- 1 Thomas Lindenberger, *Strassenpolitik. Zur Sozialgeschichte der öffentlichen Ordnung in Berlin 1900 bis 1914* (Bonn, 1999).
- 2 Peter Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin 1900* (Cambridge, 1996).
- 3 Pamela E. Swett, *Neighbors and Enemies: the Culture of Radicalism in Berlin 1929–1933* (New York, 2004).
- 4 Paul Steege, 'Crisis, Normalcy, Fantasy: Berlin and its Borders', *Contemporary European History* 3 (2014) 469–484.
- 5 Hsiu-Ling Kuo, *Monumentality and Modernity in Hitler's Berlin. The North-South Axis of the Greater Berlin Plan* (Oxford, 2013) 212–213.
- 6 Kuo, *Monumentality and Modernity in Hitler's Berlin*, 2.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 27–32.

- 8 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, 1989).
- 9 Kuo, *Monumentality and Modernity in Hitler's Berlin*, 41.
- 10 Ibid., 46.
- 11 Ibid., 47.
- 12 Ibid., 169.
- 13 Janet Ward, *Post-Wall Berlin: Borders, Space and Identity* (Basingstoke, 2011) 181.
- 14 Ward, *Post-Wall Berlin*, 172.
- 15 Ibid., 173.
- 16 Ibid., xiv.
- 17 Ibid., xiv.
- 18 Richard Sennett, *Together: the Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation* (London, 2013).
- 19 Ward, *Post-Wall Berlin*, 7.
- 20 Ibid., 16.
- 21 Ibid., 26.
- 22 Ibid., 72.
- 23 Ibid., 72.
- 24 Ibid., 77–78.
- 25 Ibid., 80.
- 26 Ibid., 102.
- 27 Ibid., 125.
- 28 Ibid., 126.
- 29 Andreas Huyssen, 'Monumental Seduction', *New German Critique* 69 (1996), 181–200, 189–190.

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