

Structures of Memory: Understanding Urban Change in Berlin and Beyond, by Jennifer A. Jordan. California: Stanford University Press, 2006. 284 pp. \$65.00 (cloth); \$25.95 (paper) and *The New Berlin: Memory, Politics, Place*, by Karen E. Till. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. 296 pp. \$75.00 (cloth); \$25.00 (paper)
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The memorial landscape which emerged in Berlin after 1989 has been widely observed by the national and international public as well as by scholars from various disciplines. The reason is obvious: After 1990, German society had to develop a new identity, that of the “Berliner Republik.” Because memorials have an important impact on the so-called *Funktionsgedächtnis* (Assmann 1999; i.e., the part of collective memory that shapes the identity of a society), the urban environment of Berlin was both a motor and a product of the formation of this new identity. In their respective books, Jennifer Jordan and Karen Till examine the preconditions and forces that have produced the urban memorial landscape in Berlin.

The central question of Jennifer Jordan’s book *Structures of Memory* is why “some sites are enscenced in official collective memory, while others fade into the landscape” (p. 1). She also explores how this relates to the development of a rapidly changing urban environment, which is structured by various heterogeneous public and private interests and legal institutions. Jordan aims to understand how the visible landscapes of memory shaping collective memory come into being. Moreover, she seeks to track the “structures of memory” that might be at work also at other sites that are haunted by their pasts, such as the World Trade Center site, the Oklahoma City bombing site, or Phnom Penh in Cambodia.

To answer these questions Jordan looks at the memorial landscape of post-1989 East Berlin. Not only are there multiple layers of German history embodied in the urban structure, but also radical political, economic, social, and spatial changes took place in the urban environment over the last several hundred years. As such, Jordan narrows her investigation to the specific traces of National Socialism.

Jordan’s investigation is situated at the crossing of urban sociology, cultural studies, history, and urban planning. She applies a qualitative and a historical approach, using archival research, analysis of secondary sources in German language, and interviews with key players such as civil society actors, journalists, planners and architects, and politicians, as well as state officials from various public authorities.

Jordan briefly describes how National Socialism has been differently represented in East and West Berlin given the distinct political and historical contexts of the Cold War in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). She points to the political function which memorializing the Nazi past had in both states, and how it played out in both sides of Berlin. Moreover, she shows some connections to the overarching aesthetic debates on memorizing National Socialism and the Holocaust such as the role of conceptual memorials or the authenticity of places. The following three chapters are devoted to the complicated stories of three categories of sites: She first examines pre-1989 GDR-monuments, which have not been removed. Then she turns to those memorial sites that have been developed after 1989. Up to this point, Jordan discusses memorial stones, cemeteries, plaques, and conceptual memorials sites, i.e., sites that are part of the official landscape of memory. Jordan finally looks at forgotten places associated with the Nazi past such as destroyed synagogues, “wild concentration camps” (i.e., torture chambers scattered throughout Berlin), and forced labor camps.

The volume concludes with an evaluation of the social and institutional origins of Berlin’s memorial landscape. Jordan identifies four major factors that determine whether a place becomes or remains an officially remembered site. Two of them are the existence of strong advocates whom she calls “memorial entrepreneurs” and a broader public responsive to these advocates. Furthermore, Jordan sees land use and ownership as crucial mediating factors. Jordan shows that sites located on privately owned land and buildings which are already in use are less likely to become memorials. Apart from this, Jordan refrains from identifying a clear pattern. Because sites that meet even three out of four of these criteria do not necessarily become part of the official memorial landscape, what happens to a place remains, at least to a wide extent, a matter of contingency and specific local conditions. Consequently, the processes observed in Berlin might indeed do little more than “speak to the production of memorial spaces in other settings as well” (p. 195). This answer might be disappointing for the reader. However, the disappointment only reflects the problematic assumption which underlies one of Jordan’s key research questions: that the complexity of urban memorial development could be reduced to a universal and generalizable pattern.

Nevertheless, the book is an important contribution to the debate on the production of memory in Berlin. Its detailed description of the various social forces (e.g., land use policy and property ownership) creating the urban landscape in Berlin and their specific role is the strongest asset of the book. Additionally, the book is unique in devoting attention to the many places fallen in oblivion. Thereby, Jordan unveils the actual spatial consequences of the

inseparableness of forgetting and remembering. She shows that examining why some places are not included in the canon of official memory leads to a better understanding of any urban memorial landscape.

Whereas Jordan looks at a broad range of different memorials, Karen E. Till in *The New Berlin: Memory, Politics, Place* focuses on the well-known triad of Nazi and Holocaust memorials in the center of Berlin: The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, the Topography of Terror, and the Jewish Museum. Her aim is to explain how the practices and politics of place-making “mediate and construct social memory and identity by localizing personal emotions and defining social relations to the past” (p. 8). Till uses a geo-ethnographic approach which focuses on the motivations of people creating identity-shaping places. She tells stories about places of memory, and she retells the stories which the people creating those places told her.

Till’s attitude toward her own text is influenced by feminist and poststructuralist skepticism towards the creation of “artificial narrative coherence” and “valid knowledge” by creating an ethnographic present and by using distinct disciplinary narrative practices (p. 23). She therefore organizes her book in an unconventional way. Theoretical and historical chapters and case studies are interrupted by interludes that are intended to “undermine the narratives and claims to authority” made by herself (p. 23). In addition, within the historical and empirical chapters, authentic voices of people involved in the place-making as well as analytical comments alternate. This manner of structuring the book is supposed to enable the reader to reflect on its methodology.

In the introductory chapter Till outlines her basic assumptions. The metaphor of the “haunting ghosts” of the past is of great importance for her work. The metaphor, which recurs somewhat insistently throughout the book, is meant to force people to search for the past. Place-making is, in Till’s view, a way of dealing with the “ghosts of the past” as it connects to “that which is no longer metaphysically present, but that which continues to have an important presence in [people’s] contemporary lives” (p. 14). Creating places of memory is therefore important for shaping the identity of individuals or social groups. Till describes the evolution of the landscape of memory in Berlin as a highly contested means of shaping the identity of the German nation as the nation of perpetrators.

Before presenting her case studies, Till describes the urban development that has occurred in Berlin after 1990. She describes the architectural and urban design trends and shows their relations to past visions of Berlin as a representation of national identity. Till then depicts the establishment of the Topography of Terror, an open air exhibition on the site where the headquarters of the *Gestapo* was located. Until 1981 when a group of

citizens started symbolically to dig for the remainders of the former *Gestapo* headquarters, the history of this vast area next to the Berlin Wall was unknown to most Berliners. Till also presents the broad array of differing perspectives on the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. Heavily contested was the question of not only whether such a memorial should be built at all in Germany and by the German government as the successors of the perpetrators, but also where it could be located and what aesthetic form would be appropriate.

The book eventually closes with a discussion of memory in Berlin after 1989 in general. Till asserts that a new “centralized public culture of commemoration” (p. 202) has emerged with the “memory district” (the triad of The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, the Topography of Terror, and the Jewish Museum) in the center of Berlin that “locates Germany as central to an emerging global moral community” (p. 196) and at the same time has become an important tourism space. But even though the triad of memorization is almost completed, the process of memorization for Till is not completed for a long time yet. For it is not only the material presence of the memory district’s parts but “the ways their meanings will continue to be contested and interpreted by locals and tourists” (p. 224) through which the identity of Berlin and the German nation will be defined.

Till’s geo-ethnographic approach generates a comprehensive picture of the discourses and historic events that have shaped the landscape of memory in Berlin’s center. It also reveals the shallowness of the official German discourse on memorials. But the text—the narratives of her informants and descriptions of Till’s research process—is in parts a little confusing, as was the evolution of this landscape. However, with her approach Till is able to present the economic, political, and moral functions of the urban landscape of memory in Berlin in a very differentiated way. The diverse narratives about this landscape combined with Till’s analytical presentation of political, historic, and economic conditions of the process of its emergence provide a brilliant insight into the complexity of German discourses about the memorization of the Nazi past—a field which too often remains obscure to foreign visitors and scholars alike.

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Reference

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