

PREFACE

You can't get lost in Berlin – Ross Williams | Written by Lucy Bentham

'No space ever vanishes utterly, leaving no trace.'

- Henri Lefebvre¹

Berlin is an unusual city – the capital of the strongest economic power in Europe, and yet a place struggling to create an identity – caught between now and then, like a photograph. Berlin is physically present, there for us to experience, whilst its past, however invisible, is inscribed into the fabric of the city.

As a stranger to Berlin, it occurred to me that I should focus on the first thing that sprang to mind as I considered the place. Without appearing prejudiced or narrow-minded, as an outsider, it was the Wall. In fact, this symbol is the touchstone of this project. Berlin is a city of division, in which duality of spaces is commonplace. A city that bears the weight of history, and remains this way in my mind.

The duality and tension the city personifies partially lies within the 'new' Berlin possessing a considerable amount of *Disneyfied* space. The line between wanting to move on, forging a New Berlin, dispelling the past, and holding on to the past just enough to make a good profit from tourism, is a blurred. It seems Berlin cannot move forward without a more concrete idea of how to deal with the past. This unresolved state is visually fascinating.

The identity of the New Berlin also causes conflict on a number of levels – the Berliners fear a new identity, apprehensive about the future, and worry about who is leading the changes. Is the New Berlin returning to being led by the State and is this in the interest of the city? In the demand for major redevelopment and reconstruction of Berlin, the State continues to control the way it wants the city to appear, with a contrived domination and management of collective memory.

It has been suggested² that in order to remember, we need tangible relics and paths to wander, thus inciting the 'Erinnerungslandschaft' or 'memory landscape', illuminating how spaces are marked with their own histories, only made stronger with perceptible, physical remnants of that history.

Being unable to let go of the past means that Berlin is a city of ghosts, a city that strives for openness but is unable to relinquish its history. This is commonly echoed in the use of transparent building materials intended to demonstrate the openness of democracy and the transparency of fact in the 'new' Berlin. However, it's not just ghost-like qualities the abundant glass holds, it's also the reminder of the absence within Berlin for the Berliners - the reminder that it is a city of ghosts.

The transparency in architecture is a premeditated strategy for progression it, visually, opposing the opacity of the concrete Wall. The permanence of the Wall in collective memory is able to remain because of the Wall being literal in a number of ways as a tangible artefact in places around the city. These Wall remnants serve as symbolic representations of past events but place an unnecessary burden on the cultural and collective memory of Berliners.

Another angle from which to observe Berlin is from the viewpoint of the everyday lives of the native Berliners, and those that encounter the city in a fleeting visit. This encompasses the duality of certain spaces, architecture, and businesses as a way of using multiplication to counteract the division, and the differentiation between the vernacular and the monumental is particularly difficult to define. A difficult balance, perhaps best achieved in Europe by Rome.

Williams is not embarking on this journey to be another tourist documenting the macabre, but instead is witnessing the location as a person endeavouring to find a sense of belonging for himself. After an initial encounter with the city in 2013, he felt he needed to return to the city. His process is; slow, thorough, and thoughtful – reflected in the use of large format analogue photographic techniques. Williams' way of working with film echoes the transient qualities of the surrounding landscape of Berlin. The use of colour in these photographs is also paramount to the work, with the veracity of the experience not anchored by black and white nostalgia.

Two questions that arose when looking through the edit for this book were the same as Linda Levitt asked of Joel Sternfeld's 'On This Site': 'How can the photograph speak for the tragic, if the site itself cannot? What "truth" do these photographs tell?'² Levitt's response is that Sternfeld has done only what he could do *in memorium* of his own memories: 'recalling and recording the tragic', which is precisely what we see in Williams' work, albeit in a location where the tragic is more prevalent than in others.

What strikes the viewer as particularly significant throughout the book is the overwhelming extent to which allegory plays a vital role from the viewpoint of the city and its history, or from Williams' own passage through it. There are often a number of mirrors to historic events that appear throughout. The deconstruction of the wall, for example, is echoed in the deconstruction of a number of subjects or locations. Fallen trees, disused buildings, and abandoned furniture in awkward locations, that further cements the notion that a Berliner has an issue with the idea of Heimat (home).

In Fig.1 I gauge the overpowering sense of a city trying to move through reconstruction as the machinery dominates the skyline, dwarfing the buildings that surround it all the while the tree to the right creeps into the frame, bigger still, acting as a sign to demonstrate nature's power over the man-made, and confirming that it is better to allow Berlin to progress more organically.

A photograph in this series that particularly demonstrates the relationship between the vernacular and the monumental in Berlin is that shown in Fig.2. The control tower appears monumental, by being a site of remembrance, mourning and memorial, in a place of ordinariness. The surrounding buildings dominate the tower with the roof being overlooked by the balconies. The pink wall to the left puts a hand in the face of yesterday with the vastness and bareness of the concrete presented opposite the tower. It appears as if the buildings are fighting to close in on the past.

We witness the broad intersections, cyphers of democracy and openness, and the abundance of street signs acting as trail markers as our eyes negotiate pathways around the images. The wall is apparent occasionally.

The implication of the forgotten past provides a sense of unease, silence, and stillness, with the outsider (Williams) looking in.

Williams continues this series, this project, this transformative tryst, with the final image in this book, on which all we need to focus is the winding pathway; onwards.

¹ Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space* (Vol. 30). Oxford: Blackwell.

² Linda Levitt. (2010). Photography, Memory, and Tragedy: Joel Sternfeld's On This Site. Available: <http://documentaryworks.org/punctum/onthissite.htm>. Last accessed 9 May 2014.