Living On the Edge: Memory, Urban Transformation, And the Legacy of Berlin Wall

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ABSTRACT

Berlin's urban landscape, shaped by the legacy of the Berlin Wall, serves as a compelling narrative of division, resilience, and reunification. This research investigates how Berlin's former border zones have evolved into vibrant urban spaces that preserve historical memory while addressing contemporary urban needs. Central to this study is the question: How do historically divided urban environments transform and reconfigure their identity in the post-reunification era? Adopting a qualitative, interpretative methodology, the study integrates narrative inquiry, autoethnographic fieldwork, and archival research, structured by a thematic analytical framework. It combines diachronic and synchronic perspectives to examine both the historical trajectories and present-day social-spatial dynamics of selected sites. Data was collected through site visits, field notes, photographs, and documentary archives, and was systematically coded and interpreted using a six-dimensional framework addressing memory, identity, architecture, and public engagement. The findings illustrate Berlin's multifaceted strategies for urban transformation, blending preservation and innovation through adaptive reuse, participatory design, artistic expression, and commemorative practices. The study offers valuable insights for cities seeking to integrate memory and identity into inclusive and sustainable urban development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Berlin is one of the most compelling urban narratives of the 20th century, a city whose physical and symbolic landscapes vividly encapsulate the tensions of division and the triumph of reunification. (Auncsluoma & Kettunen, 2008). The city's trajectory, shaped by the construction and eventual fall of the Berlin Wall, has rendered it a global emblem of ideological conflict and reconciliation. (Ward, 2011).

Borders -whether tangible or intangible- play a fundamental role in structuring spaces and shaping human experiences. As a taxonomy, borders can be categorised as physical, social, cultural, or symbolic (Chen, 2018), each serving distinct functions in delineating or connecting spaces. Physical borders, such as walls or fences, impose geographic and territorial boundaries, often reinforcing rigid separations (Capello et al., 2018). In contrast, symbolic or cultural borders mark distinctions in identity, ideology, or collective memory -boundaries that may be invisible yet deeply influence perception and interaction (Laponder & Oxenaar, 2023).

In urban contexts, borders operate as defining spatial relationships, transforming places into zones of inclusion, exclusion, or transition. The Berlin Wall, both a physical

structure and an ideological barrier, exemplified this duality -dividing East and West Berlin while simultaneously generating a space charged with layered identities (Sonnevend, 2016). Over time, the removal of such borders often reconfigures these spaces, converting once-divisive structures into sites for commemoration and integration.

1.1 Preserving The Past

Memory studies offer a conceptual framework for understanding how societies preserve, transmit, and represent their histories, particularly through a collective and cultural forms of remembrance. Maurice Halbwachs first introduced the notion of collective memory, arguing that individual memories are inherently shaped by the social groups to which individuals belong (Borghi, 2021; Halbwachs, 2020). According to Halbwachs, a society's shared memory constructs the lens through which individuals perceive the past. Building on this, French historian Pierre Nora emphasized that certain material or intangible phenomena, shaped by human intent or the passage of time, acquire symbolic significance within a community's memorial heritage. These lieux de mémoire, or sites of memory, such as monuments and public spaces, serve as anchors for historical narratives and shared identities (Nosova, 2021).

The evolution of memory from interpersonal transmission to institutionalised cultural preservation reflects a shift toward more formalised modes of commemoration. Jan and Aleida Assmann advanced Halbwachs' work by distinguishing between communicative memory—based on every day, interpersonal exchange—and cultural memory, which is maintained through durable symbolic and material forms such as rituals, archives, monuments, and artworks (Ferdinand, 2023). This distinction highlights how memory becomes embedded in the built environment and public institutions, ensuring its endurance beyond the lifespan of direct human communication.

Aleida Assmann, in particular, underscores the role of modernity in transforming memory into a tool for constructing collective identity, especially within institutional settings like museums and memorial practices (Juutistenaho, 2022; Sluga et al., 2023). Reconstructed historic districts, war memorials, and other commemorative spaces not only function as repositories of historical memory but also actively shape public discourse. By grounding abstract histories in tangible forms, they foster communal reflection and contribute to the formation of enduring social identities (Booth, 2006).

1.2 Social Spaces and Dynamics

Urban sociology offers a critical lens through which to examine the relationship between space and society, revealing how urban environments not only reflect but also shape and mediate social interactions (Tonkiss, 2005). Henri Lefebvre's influential concept of social space asserts that space is not a passive or neutral backdrop, but a socially produced entity—constructed through historical, political, and cultural processes. In this view, urban spaces are dynamic arenas where everyday life, symbolic practices, and structures of power intersect, reinforcing the idea that space is both a product and a producer of social relations (Lefebvre & Nicolson-Smith, 1992)

In parallel, Sharon Zukin highlights the tension between culture and commerce in urban development, focusing particularly on the commodification of public space. She critiques how global capitalism reshapes authentic, lived environments into sanitized, market-oriented landscapes, often eroding local identity and displacing

memory. This process is especially evident in post-reunification Berlin, where former sites of trauma and significance now contend with the pressures of tourism, branding, and real estate development (Zukin, 1996). These insights foreground the contested nature of urban space, where memory, identity, and market forces converge.

1.3. Architecture, Memory, and Identity

Architecture plays a pivotal role in shaping collective memory and identity by embedding symbolic meaning into the built environment. Aldo Rossi's theory of the city as a collective memory frames architecture not as a functional form but as a repository of shared history and experience. Monuments, ruins, and urban artefacts, in Rossi's view, embody the collective identity of a place, anchoring communities to their cultural past (Rosi et al., 1982). Similarly, Kevin Lynch's framework of urban memory explores how individuals perceive, navigate, and emotionally connect with the city through legible elements such as landmarks, paths, and edges. These features construct a "mental map" that reinforces spatial memory and personal identity (Lynch, 1960).

The presentation of heritage within cities typically follows two main approaches. The first centres on spatial representation—employing permanent displays such as monuments, commemorative plaques, and public art to symbolise historical events and values. The second focuses on participatory engagement, offering interactive and immersive experiences through guided tours, reconstructions, and interpretive centres at historical or archaeological sites. These formats combine static and dynamic elements of memory transmission, fostering both reverence and dialogue between the public and the past (Mladenović & Živković, 2023).

Adaptive reuse has emerged as a compelling strategy to reconcile heritage preservation with contemporary urban needs. This practice involves transforming disused or historically significant buildings for new functions, thereby preserving their identity while integrating them into the present urban fabric (Eyüce & Eyüce, 2010). In cities like Berlin—scarred by war and division—adaptive reuse has turned once-divisive spaces into powerful symbols of reconciliation and resilience. Such interventions underscore architecture's role not only as a medium for memory, but also as an active agent in shaping social transformation and healing (Bach, 2016). In cities like Berlin—scarred by war and division—adaptive reuse has turned once-divisive spaces into powerful symbols of reconciliation and resilience. Such interventions underscore architecture's role not only as a medium for memory, but also as an active agent in shaping social transformation and healing.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative methodology that combines elements of narrative inquiry, autoethnographic field observation, and archival analysis, supported by a structured thematic analysis framework. It investigates the transformation of urban spaces along the Berlin Wall by examining how memory, identity, and spatial design intersect in sites marked by historical division and post-reunification regeneration.

This approach is rooted in autoethnography, where the researcher engages directly with the spaces through reflective, immersive site visits, combining first-hand experiential accounts with photographic and spatial documentation. Autoethnography enables a reflexive exploration of space, allowing the personal lens of the researcher to offer insight into the emotional, symbolic, and social dimensions of place (Ellis et al, 2011).

Methodologically, the study bridges diachronic and synchronic analysis: it traces the temporal transformation of selected sites (from their pre Cold War origins to their current urban functions), while also focusing on their present-day spatial identity and social use. This combination allows for a layered understanding of the evolving meanings attached to each site.

2.1 Framework for Analysis

A data-to-theme path was followed, beginning with data collection through archival review, field notes, and photographic records, followed by iterative coding and categorization. Thematic patterns were then interpreted through a six-dimensional analytical framework:

- **Historical Context:** Examining the role of the sites during and after the Berlin Wall era.
- **Memory Studies:** Investigating how the sites contribute to collective and individual memory.
- **Urban Sociology:** Exploring the Socio-demographic surrounding spaces.
- **Architecture and Spatial Analysis:** Assessing the design and functionality of the spaces.
- **Identity and Symbolism:** Understanding the emotional and symbolic resonance of these sites.
- **Current Usage and Public Perception:** Evaluating the contemporary roles and public engagement with the spaces.

2.2 Case Study Selection

The research focuses on analysing different sites along the Berlin Wall that pass in the middle of Berlin city – See Figure 1, chosen for their historical and cultural significance as well as their varied functions in contemporary Berlin. These case studies represent a spectrum of uses, from memorialisation to recreation. The combination of these sites offers a comprehensive lens for examining Berlin's transformation post-reunification. These sites are:

Figure 1: Berlin Map with Berlin Wall Studied part
Source: Edited by the Author from (Baciu, 2024).

- **Brandenburg Gate:** A powerful symbol of division and reunification.
- **Berlin Wall Memorial:** A comprehensive historical perspective with preserved sections of the Wall.
- **East Side Gallery:** The intersection of art, memory, and public space,
- **Checkpoint Charlie:** Offers insights into the commercialisation of historical memory.
- **Potsdamer Platz:** Illustrates dramatic urban redevelopment and economic revitalisation post-reunification.
- **Landschaftspark Rudow:** An integration of natural landscapes with historical elements.

2.3 Validation and Limitation

To enhance the reliability and scholarly robustness of this study, the findings were presented and discussed during a research stay at the Brandenburg University of Technology (BTU) Cottbus–Senftenberg, within the Department of Urban Design and Urban Studies. This academic exchange included faculty members, postgraduate students, and experts in urban design, spatial transformation, and memory studies. Their feedback contributed to the refinement of thematic interpretations and helped align the research insights with current academic discourse on urban transformation and post-conflict spatial memory.

The study also acknowledges certain methodological limitations. First, no formal interviews or surveys were conducted, largely due to language barriers and ethical considerations. Second, access to some sites was restricted due to ongoing construction or maintenance, limiting direct observation in those areas. These constraints are not viewed as shortcomings but rather as inherent features of a qualitative, interpretive approach that values contextual depth, subjective insight, and reflective analysis over statistical generalizability.

Despite these limitations, methodological triangulation—through the integration of archival research, autoethnographic field observations, and academic validation—supports the overall trustworthiness of the findings. Figure 2 provides a visual summary of the research methodology and the stages of the data-to-theme thematic analysis.
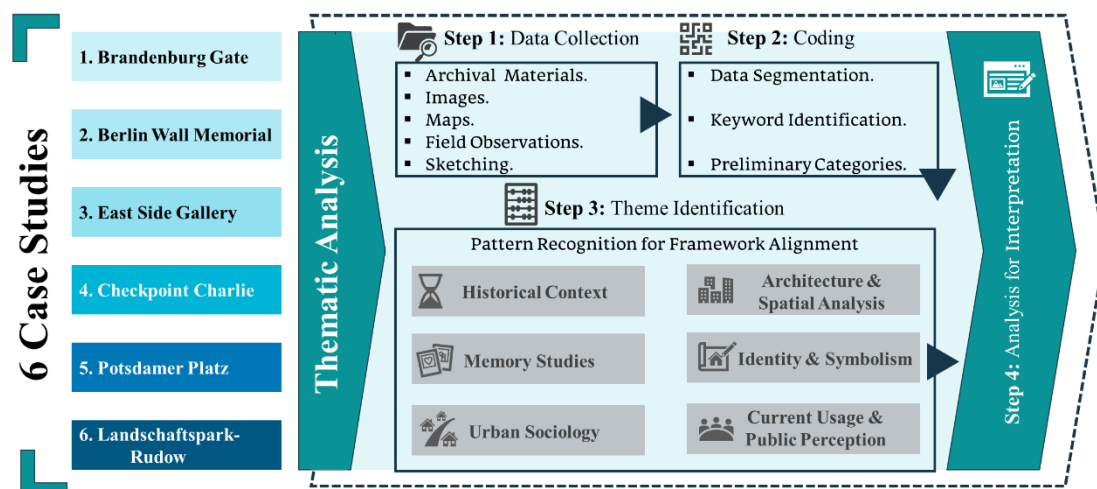

Figure 2: The Research Methodology
Source: (Author)

3. DISCUSSION:

The reunification of Berlin marked a moment of transformation, redefining not only the city's physical fabric but also its collective identity and societal memory. This period of transition was pivotal in shaping a new city identity, as Berlin reconcile its dual narratives of East and West while fostering a sense of unity and inclusivity. The built environment, including its monuments, public spaces, and neighbourhoods, became the stage for negotiating memory—balancing the preservation of historical authenticity with the spaces creation that reflected contemporary aspirations. The selected cases show different methodologies for urban identity-making.

3.1 Brandenburg Gate: A Monument of Division and Unity

Constructed in the late 18th century, Brandenburg Gate was originally a ceremonial entryway into Berlin, symbolising peace under Prussian rule. Its neoclassical design, with twelve Doric columns crowned by the Quadriga statue—a chariot driven by Victoria, the goddess of victory—embodied both grandeur and political aspiration (Figure 3). Throughout its early history, it served a backdrop for military parades and royal processions, embedding itself as a symbol of power and unity. However, in the 20th century, the Gate evolved into silent witness to Germany's most turbulent political transformations.

Figure 3: The Brandenburg Gate
Source :(Maguire, 2024)

- **Historical context: from division to reunification**

During Berlin's division, the Brandenburg Gate was trapped within the heavily monitored death strip, physically inaccessible yet symbolically potent. Visible from West Berlin but isolated from both sides, it stood as a stark reminder of the city's—and the nation's—division. For East Berliners, it represented a disconnected past; for West Berliners, it became a potent symbol of separation and longing. Its prominent yet unreachable presence exemplified Maurice Halbwachs' concept of collective memory (Halbwachs, 2020), embodying both loss and historical continuity.

A defining moment in the Gate's symbolic trajectory occurred in 1987, when U.S. President Ronald Reagan famously challenged Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to "tear down this wall" during a speech delivered near the Gate (Figure 4) When the Berlin Wall eventually fell in 1989 (Figure 5), the Brandenburg Gate was immediately reactivated as a national symbol—this time of unity and hope. Its formal reopening on December 22, 1989, marked a pivotal chapter in Berlin's and Germany's collective narrative.

Figure 4: Ronald Reagan Speech at
Brandenburg Gate West Berlin, 1987
Source: (Maidun Collection, 2007)

Figure 5: West German at the Brandenburg
Gate on the day of the Berlin Wall Fall, 1989
Source: (Bundesregierung, 1989)

- **Present-day role: a living monument**

Today, the Brandenburg Gate serves as a unifying landmark in a revitalised Pariser Platz—once a militarised buffer zone and now a vibrant urban space. It functions as a site for civic engagement, public celebration, and international diplomacy. From hosting world leaders to welcoming thousands of revellers during events like the Festival of Lights and the anniversary of the Wall's fall (Figure 6, Figure 7), the Gate actively bridges past and present.

Figure 6: The lightshow at Brandenburg Gate
on Festival of Lights, October 2024
Source: The Author

Figure 7: 35th anniversary of the fall of
the Berlin Wall at the Gate, Nov. 2024
Source: The Author

- **Architectural significance and urban identity**

The Gate's neoclassical form continues to anchor Berlin's urban identity. Its architecture communicates both triumph and endurance, while the surrounding open space allows for flexible use—supporting both commemorative and social functions. As a result, the Brandenburg Gate exemplifies Berlin's dual commitment: to honour its history while cultivating an inclusive, contemporary public realm.

- **Balancing memory and modernity**

Brandenburg Gate has largely retained its historical dignity. Its surrounding area remains free from overt commercialisation, supporting its role as a reflective civic space. The redevelopment of Pariser Platz—undertaken with careful urban design guidelines—has further reinforced the Gate's symbolic importance. As Ayyash et al (2013) argue, its restoration has helped re-establish a shared civic identity in post-reunification Berlin. The Gate now serves as a spatial and symbolic anchor for the city, embodying its transformation from a site of division to one of reconciliation.

▪ **Reflections on Symbolism**

Standing before the Gate, one cannot help but feel its symbolic weight. Its towering columns and commanding Quadriga inspire awe, yet it is the history embedded in its stone that resonates most. The Gate serves as a space where memory and identity converge—a monument not only to Berlin's past, but also to its capacity for resilience, change, and unity. It invites both introspection and celebration, making it a living symbol of the city's endurance and transformation.

## 3.2 Berlin Wall Memorial: A Space for Reflection and Memory

The Berlin Wall Memorial at Bernauer Street is more than a historical landmark -it is a living testimony of the city's Cold War past and its enduring legacy of division, loss, and resilience. Situated along a street that witnessed dramatic escape attempts and personal tragedies, the memorial preserves a fragment of the Wall and the adjoining "death strip" (Figure 8), anchoring the memory of separation in physical space.

Figure 8: Berlin Wall Memorial
Source: The Author

▪ **A journey through history**

Bernauer Street exemplifies the spatial violence of the Berlin Wall, which split neighborhoods, severed families, and disrupted daily life. It was along this street that residents leapt from apartment windows to reach the West, and where the Church of Reconciliation stood trapped in the no-man's-land (Figure 9-a). In 1985, East German authorities demolished the church, making its loss a potent symbol of spiritual and communal rupture. After reunification, the site was reimagined with the Chapel of Reconciliation (2000), built on the original footprint (Figure 9-b). The Berlin Wall Memorial was founded in 1998 and expanded in 2014 with the Visitor Center and the Window of Remembrance, reflecting a broader shift toward immersive, educational engagement with the past.
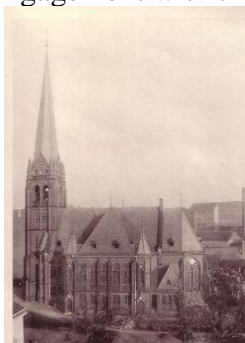
(a) The Old Church
Source: (Schlesische Dachstein & Falzziegel-Fabriken, 1899)

(b) The New Church
Source: The Author

Figure 9: Church of Reconciliation

- **Symbolism and emotional resonance**

The Memorial operates as both a spatial and emotional site of remembrance. It preserves original features, including wall segments, watchtowers (Figure 10-a,b) and the death strip (Figure 10-c), enabling visitors to confront the stark physicality of division. In alignment with Pierre Nora's concept of (sites of memory), the Memorial crystallises collective memory into a tangible form, offering space for contemplation and emotional connection(Nora, 1989).

(a) Watch Tower   (b) Watch Tower Skeleton   (c) Open Exhibition on death stripe
Figure 10: Berlin Wall Memorial Elements
Source: (Benner, n.d.)

Walking along the preserved landscape, one is struck by the juxtaposition of ideology and humanity, of concrete barriers and personal courage. Interpretive elements—plaques, exhibitions, and audio guides—invite reflection on the lived experiences of those affected, transforming a political boundary into a space of storytelling and mourning.

- **Narratives of humanity**

Central to the Memorial's impact is its focus on human stories. "The Window of Remembrance," (Figure 11-a) showcases photographs and biographies of those who perished, shifting the narrative from geopolitical abstraction to personal loss. This curatorial approach foregrounds dignity, framing history through the lens of individual sacrifice and courage. And that's beside the existence of the visitor center (Figure 11-b). The Memorial's design facilitates this narrative arc. Walkways, observation platforms, and guided paths encourage a chronological and emotional journey—each step prompting introspection and connection to a layered urban past.

(a) Window of Remembrance   (b) Visitor Center
Figure 11: Berlin Wall Memorial Elements
Source: (Benner, n.d.)

- **Contemporary relevance and public engagement**

Today, the Berlin Wall Memorial functions as a key educational and cultural space. It draws a diverse public—students, researchers, tourists, and locals—fostering dialogue around themes of division, memory, and reconciliation. With its multimedia installations, community events, and bilingual exhibits, the Memorial bridges past and present, using the power of place to engage visitors with Berlin's complex history and its contemporary identity.

3.3 East Side Gallery: Memory, Art, and Urban Transformation

The East Side Gallery stands as one of Berlin's most iconic and dynamic landmarks, transforming the remnants of the Berlin Wall into an expansive open-air gallery (Figure 12). Spanning 1.3 kilometres along the Spree River in the Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg district, the gallery is not just a series of murals, but a living symbol of Berlin's resilience and reinvention. It is a cultural monument that blends history, art, and urban transformation.

Figure 12: The East Side Gallery on Spree River
Source: (Bikademy, n.d.)

- **Historical context: from division to artistic expression**

The East Side Gallery is the longest remaining section of the Berlin Wall, standing as a monumental remnant of the physical and ideological divide between East and West Berlin (Figure 13-a). In 1990, the site was designated within the Senate's Masterplan for Preserving the Wall Remains (Sonnevend, 2016). As artists from 21 countries converged on this stretch of the Wall to create murals that symbolize freedom, hope, and peace. Born from this collective artistic response, the Gallery emerged not simply as a memorial but as a canvas for confronting and processing the social and political upheavals of the era (Figure 13-b).

(a) Before the Wall Fall 1988.
Source: (Berlin Wall Foundation, n.d.-a)
(b) Artists walking around 1990.
Source: (The East Side Gallery, n.d.-b)
Figure 13: Views of Mühlenstraße and the border strip

▪ **Memory studies: collective memory through art**

The Gallery functions as an essential space for collective memory, helping to preserve the division of Berlin while also celebrating the peaceful resolution of reunification. The murals serve as vivid markers of all eras from the division period till now, depicting everything from the euphoria of reunification to the struggles for freedom and the deep scars left by the Cold War (Art on the Wall, n.d.). This transition from individual recollection to cultural memory aligns with Jan and Aleida Assmann's distinction between communicative and cultural memory (Ferdinand, 2023).

Over the years, the East Side Gallery has shown signs of wear, with its once-vivid murals fading due to weather, pollution, and vandalism. To address this, restoration efforts invited original artists to repaint or recreate their works based on references (Figure 14). While this helped ensure the survival of the murals, critics argue it diminished their authenticity, removing the immediacy and emotional rawness of the originals. Others defend the restorations as necessary to keep the Gallery relevant and legible for future generations.

| (a)   In 1996 – the Original Painting | (b)   In 2010 - After restoration |

Figure 14: The development of the artwork "Curriculum Vitae" by Susanne Kunjappu-Jellinek
Source: (Berlin Wall Foundation, n.d.-c)

This raises an ongoing debate: Is the East Side Gallery a monument that must be preserved or a living artwork that should evolve? As Berlin continues to change, the Gallery's dual role prompts reflection—can it truly embody both?

▪ **Urban sociology: social dynamics and community transformation**

Over time, the Gallery has become a cultural and social space that attracts a diverse audience. Bordered by the Spree River and surrounded by recreational areas, it fosters community interaction. It draws a wide range of visitors—from locals who use the space for leisure (Figure 15-a), to tourists seeking to experience Berlin's history (Figure 15-b). The area has adapted to its new cultural role, with nearby services and infrastructure catering to the public, integrating the memory site into Berlin's urban rhythm and economy.

The gallery also stands at the intersection of significant demographic changes. The surrounding neighbourhood, once brown land within East Berlin, has evolved into a vibrant hub. This shift reflects the broader urban redevelopment of Berlin's eastern districts, where modern architecture on one bank of the Spree contrasts with preserved historical structures on the other (Figure 16).

(a) The back of the east side gallery as a relaxing park
Source: (Imago/Hoch Zwei Stock/Angerer, n.d.)

(b) Tourists taking photos with the painting
Source: (Eastland, 2017)

Figure 15: The Urban Context around East Side Gallery

Figure 16: The Urban Context Around East Side Gallery.
Source: By the Author.

- **Symbolism and identity: art as memory**

The Gallery serves not only as a historical marker but as a contemporary symbol of artistic freedom and collective memory. The murals do more than commemorate— they actively participate in shaping Berlin's evolving identity, demonstrating the power of public art to convey complex emotional and political messages.

The gallery contributes to Berlin's identity as a city that values its past while embracing transformation. The emotional impact of the East Side Gallery is profound: it evokes hope, freedom, and resilience. The adjacent green spaces and reflective atmosphere further deepen this connection, offering visitors a space for remembrance, dialogue, and inspiration.

3.4 Checkpoint Charlie: Contrasting Narratives, Complementary Experiences

Located in the heart of Berlin, Checkpoint Charlie and the Al-Sisi Panorama share not only historical significance but also physical proximity. As a combined urban zone, they exemplify the tension between historical preservation and artistic interpretation, offering a multidimensional lens into the city's divided past.

- **Checkpoint Charlie: a photographic replica of the past**

As one of the most visited historical sites in Berlin, Checkpoint Charlie is an iconic symbol of the Cold War era. It was once a diplomatic and tourist crossing point between East and West Berlin (Ward, 2011), and now, it stands as a replica (**Error!**

Reference source not found.), with a recreated guardhouse and exhibition panels describing the division of the city.

Figure 17: Checkpoint Charlie Replica
Source: (SeanPavonePhoto, 2014)

▪ **Al-sisi panorama: a dynamic artistic interpretation of daily life**

In contrast, the Al-Sisi Panorama provides an immersive and artistic exploration of life in Berlin during the Cold War (Figure 18-a), particularly focusing on the lived experiences of ordinary people. The panoramic artwork vividly depicts scenes of daily life across divided Berlin, capturing moments of quiet acts of resistance. The panorama transports viewers into the very heart of historical events, placing them in the middle of Berlin's bustling streets and apartments, allowing them to feel the tension, anxiety, and resilience that characterised life in a city split by ideology. By adding the BlackBox Exhibition (Figure 18-b) the political circumstances of World War II and the causes for the division and reunification of Germany that are demonstrated through photos.

(a) Al-Sisi Panorama and marks of Berlin wall on the street.   (b) The black Box exhibition
Source: By the Author.   Source: (Viaje Comigo, 2014)
Figure 18: The urban zone of Checkpoint Charlie

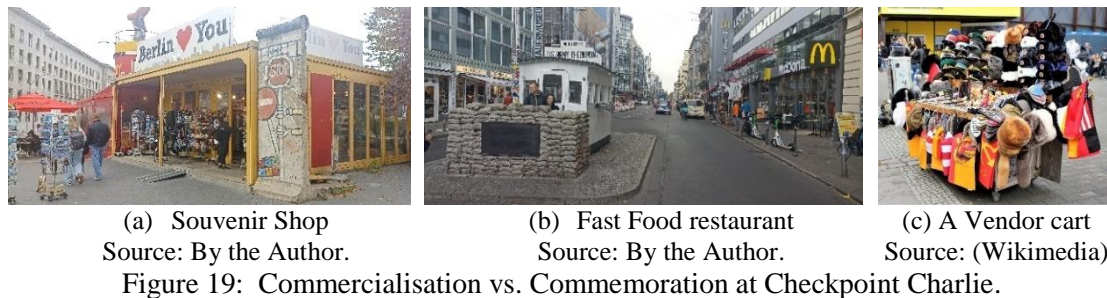▪ **Complementary experiences in a single zone**

Despite their different approaches, these two spaces complement each other. Checkpoint Charlie offers a more institutional, symbolic narrative, while the Al-Sisi Panorama provides an emotive, grassroots-level reflection. Together, they present

Berlin's Cold War memory from both macro and micro perspectives—official and personal, historical, and experiential.

▪ **Urban development: commercialisation vs. Commemoration**

The surrounding urban space reveals a growing tension between commemoration and commercialisation. The evolution of the area into a bustling tourist destination—with souvenir shops, fast food outlets, and street performers (Figure 19). However, this commercialisation raises concerns about the authenticity of historical experience. This commercialisation reflects Sharon Zukin's critique of the commodification of urban spaces, where history is often compromised for economic gain (Zukin, 1996)

| (a) Souvenir Shop | (b) Fast Food restaurant | (c) A Vendor cart |
| Source: By the Author. | Source: By the Author. | Source: (Wikimedia) |

Figure 19: Commercialisation vs. Commemoration at Checkpoint Charlie.

3.5 Potsdamer Platz: From Division to Modernity

Once a vibrant cultural and commercial hub, Potsdamer Platz was reduced to a desolate no-man's land by the Berlin Wall (Figure 20-a). Then it became a desolate no man's land during the Cold War (Figure 20-b) severed by the Berlin Wall (Heine, 2001). Today, it has undergone one of the most dramatic urban transformations in Europe, evolving into a bustling commercial and cultural centre (Figure 20-c). The evolution of Potsdamer Platz highlights the tension between the remembrance of a divided past and the urgency of economic development in a reunified Berlin (Mair & Zaman, 2020).
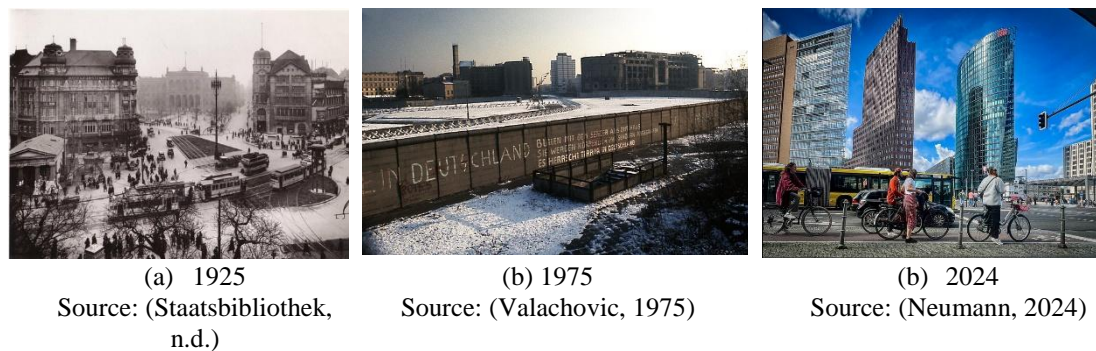

| (a) 1925 | (b) 1975 | (b) 2024 |
| Source: (Staatsbibliothek, n.d.) | Source: (Valachovic, 1975) | Source: (Neumann, 2024) |

Figure 20: Potsdamer Platz through History

▪ **Reunification and transformation**

With the fall of the Berlin Wall, Potsdamer Platz became a symbol of the new Germany. The area was seen as a prime opportunity for redevelopment—an empty canvas in the heart of the city that could embody Berlin's post-reunification ambitions. In the early 1990s, an urban development plan by architect Hilmer-Sattler was implemented (Mair & Zaman, 2020). This period of urban regeneration focused on the construction of skyscrapers (Figure 20-c), shopping malls, and cultural institutions in modern and post-modern architectural styles, giving Potsdamer Platz a new identity as a commercial hub.

- **Urban sociology: commercialisation vs. Commemoration**

The transformation of Potsdamer Platz reflects the city's prioritisation of economic revival over historical commemoration. Though physically near sites of memory, the area lacks overt historical referencing. This absence has sparked debate on whether such developments dilute the cultural memory of the Wall and its symbolic presence (Ristic & Frank, 2019). The architectural focus on globalised aesthetics may obscure the site's past, favouring a narrative of forward-looking growth.

- **Architectural analysis: a space of modernity and memory**

The gleaming glass facades of the Sony Center, the towering skyscrapers, and the sprawling shopping complexes all point to a Berlin that is looking forward, rather than backward. Yet, amid these modern structures, there are subtle elements that nod to the city's history (Nowobilska & Zaman, 2014). The Berlin Wall itself is commemorated through pieces scattered across the square (Figure 21). However, these gestures are often overshadowed by larger commercial developments.

Figure 21: Part of Berlin wall segment in Potsdamer Plaza.
Source: By the Author.

3.6 Landschaftspark Rudow: From Division to Ecological Renewal

Landschaftspark Rudow, located in the far southern part of Berlin, serves as a poignant example of how urban spaces can be transformed from areas of conflict into spaces of unity and renewal. Once part of the Berlin Wall's militarized zone, today, it stands as a public park that blends nature, history, and social transformation (Berlin.de, n.d).

The park's origins are closely linked to the Berlin Wall's impact on the city's landscape. Located near the A113 highway, which cuts through this historically charged area, the park's creation is a direct response to the need for ecological compensation after the expansion of the highway (**Error! Reference source not found.**). This transformation aligns with Aldo Rossi's theory of the city as a 'collective memory' (Rosi et al., 1982), where Landschaftspark Rudow serves as a tangible record of cultural and historical identity, transforming a space of division into one of ecological and social renewal.

- **The wall as a protective barrier: a new meaning**

One of the most striking features of Landschaftspark Rudow is the presence of a wall that runs through the park (Figure 23-a), similar in appearance to the Berlin Wall

itself (Figure 23-b). This modern wall was constructed not to divide people but to protect them from the high-speed traffic of the highway. However, its visual resemblance to the Berlin Wall is impossible to ignore. This barrier, while serving a practical purpose, evokes the symbolic legacy of the Berlin Wall, shifting its meaning from oppression and division to protection and safety.

Figure 22: Landschaftspark Rudow
Source: (Berlin.de, n.d.)

Figure 22: Part of Landscgaftspark Site
Source: (Berlin.de, n.d.)

(a) The highway wall and electric tower in Landschaftspark.
Source: By the Author

(b) Berlin wall and watch tower in the Berlin Wall Memorial
Source: (Adobe Stock, n.d.)

Figure 23: Comparison between Walls meaning through time

- **Eco- Park and social transformation: integration with nature**

The park itself is designed with a focus on ecological restoration, blending natural landscapes with elements of its past. Walking through the park, visitors encounter wide green spaces, hiking paths, and areas for public recreation, all of which provide an opportunity for physical engagement with the site. The presence of wildlife, such as birds of prey and small mammals (Figure 24), further enhance the park's ecological value. These efforts aim to reintegrate the natural world into the urban landscape, healing the environmental scars left by the Berlin Wall and its surrounding structures.

Moreover, the park represents a space for social transformation. The community around the park has embraced it as a symbol of renewal and shared history. It offers a venue for educational programs, cultural events, and recreational activities, fostering a sense of belonging and connection among residents.

- **Balancing memory and modernity**

In much the same way that the Berlin Wall Memorial balances historical preservation with contemporary engagement, Landschaftspark Rudow strives to honour its past while facilitating modern use. While the park's main function is as a public space for recreation and education, its design thoughtfully incorporates elements that commemorate the site's history. Information plaques, remnants of the Wall, and the boundary walls all serve as subtle reminders of the division that once defined this space. However, they are balanced by the green spaces, open areas, and public facilities that invite interaction, symbolizing the transformation from division to unity.
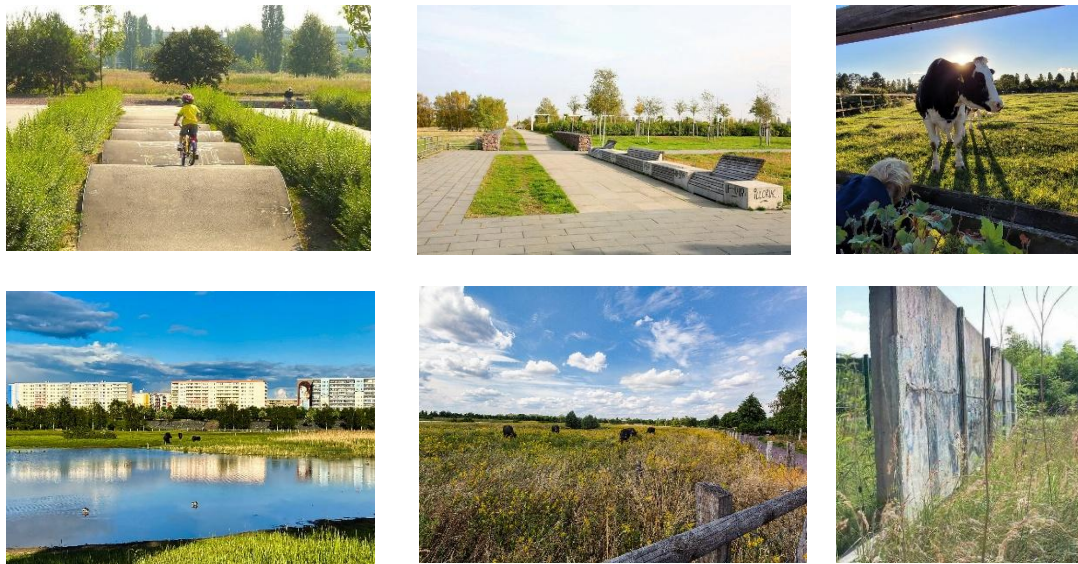

Figure 24: Shots of Landschaftspark
Source: (Schwelle, n.d.)

The park's design is an example of adaptive reuse, where an area once defined by conflict is repurposed into a space that nurtures both the environment and the social fabric of the city.

To consolidate the findings across the diverse case studies, Table 1 reflects the multilayered interplay between space, memory, and identity, enabling a deeper understanding of how Berlin's fragmented sites narrate and negotiate post-Wall realities.

4. FINDINGS:

The findings underscore the significance of preserving historical memory within the context of urban development. Berlin presents a compelling case in which diverse strategies of memory preservation coexist with urban modernisation, contributing meaningfully to the city's cultural identity and social fabric. The case studies reveal that no singular approach defines success. Instead, a variety of methodologies reflect how memory, space, and identity intersect in contextually specific ways:

1. **Historical Preservation and Adaptive Reuse:** Integrating historical sites into the contemporary urban fabric while retaining their significance.
2. **Educational Engagement:** Using educational programs and interactive exhibits to keep historical narratives alive.
3. **Artistic Interpretation:** Employing art to preserve and reinterpret historical memory.

4. **Community Involvement:** Engaging local communities in the preservation and celebration of historical spaces.
5. **Balancing Commercialisation and Commemoration:** Ensuring economic benefits does not compromise historical authenticity.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Case Studies along the Berlin Wall Based on Thematic Framework [*]

Case Study	Historical Context	Memory Studies	Urban Sociology	Architecture & Spatial Design	Identity & Symbolism	Current Usage & Public Perception
Brandenburg Gate	Symbol of division and later reunification.	National memory and unity celebration.	Central gathering space; heavily touristic.	Neoclassical architecture.	Icon of German unity.	Iconic landmark; formal, state oriented.
Berlin Wall Memorial	Authentic segment of the Wall; focus on division.	Emotional remembrance; commemorative storytelling.	Reflective space; educational.	Preserved materials with landscape design.	Symbol of trauma and resilience.	Revered for authenticity and education.
East Side Gallery	Longest preserved Wall segment.	Public memory through murals.	Open promenade, popular with both locals and tourists.	Mural-covered Wall; changes through time.	Strong public symbolism; sometimes contested.	Iconic photo site; debates over restoration and meaning.
Checkpoint Charlie & Panorama	Historic border crossing. Simulated memory via replica.	Simulated history through artistic storytelling.	Commercial strip; highly visited but less engaged.	Temporary structures; artistic interventions.	Memory through spectacle; lacks authenticity.	Tourist-heavy; criticized as superficial or commercialized.
Potsdamer Platz	Severely damaged; redeveloped post-unification.	Little commemoration; a symbol of economic rebirth.	Business, commerce, and entertainment district.	Glass high-rises; dramatic contrast with history.	Represents break from past.	Viewed as flashy, modern; less emotional attachment.
Landschaftspark Rudow	Former death strip along highway edge.	Quiet remembrance through ecological restoration.	Local recreation area; family- and nature-oriented.	Green corridors, wildlife zones.	Healing through nature.	Peaceful, symbolic, minimal tourist traffic.

Source: (Author)

To synthesise these insights, **Error! Not a valid bookmark self-reference.** offers a comparative evaluation of each case's emotional resonance, preservation efforts, public engagement, commercial activity, and commemorative value. This structure reinforces the argument that there is no single formula for reactivating post-conflict urban spaces—rather, success lies in how meaning, memory, and public life are balanced in contextually sensitive ways.

Table 2: Evaluative Summary of Case Studies by Preservation, Engagement, and Commemoration Intensity*

Case Study	Emotion	Preserv-ation	Community Engagement	Commercia-lisation	Commem-ortion
Brandenburg Gate	Pride, Resilience	High	High	Moderate	High
Berlin Wall Memorial	Sorrow, Fear	Very High	High	Low	Very High
East Side Gallery	Hope, Inspiration	Moderate	High	Moderate	High
Checkpoint Charlie	Historical, Reflection	Low	Moderate	High	Moderate
Potsdamer Platz	Boredom, Separated	Moderate	Moderate	High	Moderate
Landschaftspark Rudow	Peace, Calmness	High	Very High	Low	High

Source: (Author)

5. CONCLUSION

This research explores how Berlin has transformed key urban spaces associated with the Berlin Wall, navigating the challenges of memorialisation and redevelopment in a reunified context. Through six emblematic case studies—Brandenburg Gate, Berlin Wall Memorial, East Side Gallery, Checkpoint Charlie, Potsdamer Platz, and Landschaftspark Rudow—the study investigates how spatial design, collective memory, and urban identity intersect to shape meaningful and multifunctional places.

The analysis reveals that successful urban transformation is rooted in a nuanced combination of historical preservation, artistic interpretation, educational outreach, and public participation. Moreover, it requires a careful balance between commemorative integrity and the pressures of commercialisation. These strategies have enabled Berlin not only to honour its divided past but also to create inclusive, reflective, and future-oriented urban environments.

Importantly, the study affirms that embedding memory into the urban fabric is not merely about preserving the past; it is about actively shaping cultural identity and civic consciousness in the present.

Future directions may involve expanding this inquiry through comparative analyses of post-conflict urban transformations in other cities, helping to illuminate diverse approaches to spatial memory and regeneration. Longitudinal research could assess how these memorial sites evolve over time, while quantitative or survey-based studies may offer broader insight into public perception and social impact. Finally, further exploration of digital tools for memory preservation—such as augmented reality, interactive archives, and virtual reconstructions—could deepen public engagement and open new pedagogical possibilities.

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العيش على الحافة: الذاكرة، التحول الحضري، وإرث جدار برلين

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ملخص البحث

يشكّل المشهد الحضري في برلين، المتأثّر بظلّ جدار برلين، سردية مركّبة حول الانقسام والمقاومة وإعادة البناء. يتناول هذا البحث كيف تحوّلت المناطق الحدودية السابقة إلى فضاءات حضرية نابضة تحتضن الذاكرة دون أن تتجمّد فيها، بل تنفتح على احتياجات المدينة المعاصرة. ينطلق البحث من سؤال محوري: كيف تعيد البيئات الحضرية التي مزّقتها الانقسامات التاريخية تشكيل هويتها في زمن ما بعد إعادة التوحيد؟

يعتمد البحث على منهج نوعي تأويلي يجمع بين السرد البحثي، والعمل الميداني الذاتي، والتحليل الأرشيفي، في إطار تحليلي موضوعي ذي ستة أبعاد تشمل: الذاكرة، الهوية، العمارة، الحيّز العام، المشاركة المجتمعية، وإعادة التوظيف. وقد تم جمع البيانات من مواقع مختارة عبر الزيارات الميدانية، والملاحظات التوثيقية، والصور الفوتوغرافية، والأرشيفات التاريخية.

تكشف النتائج عن استراتيجيات برلين المتنوّعة في إعادة إنتاج المكان الحضري، من خلال ممارسات تجمع بين الحفاظ على الذاكرة والابتكار العمراني: مثل إعادة التوظيف المعماري، والتصميم التشاركي، والفن العام، والممارسات التذكارية. ويقدّم البحث نموذجاً قابلاً للتأمل لمدن تسعى إلى إدماج الذاكرة الجماعية ضمن مسارات تنمية حضرية أكثر إنصافاً واستدامة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التحول الحضري، الذاكرة الجماعية، حفظ الذاكرة، جدار برلين، إعادة التوظيف، الهوية الحضرية