

Remembering as urban praxis: appropriating history, shaping public space

Verena Elisabeth Eitel (Berlin) and Nadine Kesting Jiménez (Leipzig)

Modes of using the urban space are constantly being generated and renegotiated; ever more ascriptions of meaning overlap and supersede each other. Expert knowledge is produced in a wide variety of places, both within the institutional framework and, increasingly, beyond it – by everyday or local knowledge describing and shaping the urban. Urban space can therefore be characterized as a construct of physical, architectural facets – materials, shapes, dimensions, and locations – and narrative facets such as political interests, functional uses, and ideological connotations, complete with the digital dimensions with which they interact.

Recalling the past, the culture of remembering, is of central importance for forming the city, its identity, and that of its inhabitants. It is an urban practice that involves a process of narrating and scrutinizing history, and making it present in urban space. Remembering is a mode of participation and activism that can be seen to revive history, create and shape the public sphere, criticize historical constructs and misconceptions, and negotiate new ideas. Its potential lies, however, not only in the revision and correction it implies, but also in its capacity to establish memory culture as a mode of debate and negotiation. Co-using urban public spaces does not necessarily imply having a share in them. Contemporary debates are therefore questioning and rethinking urban development policies in order to promote citizen participation. Focusing on memory culture, we consider the processes of debate and negotiation leading to the appropriation of urban spaces to be part of the cultural infrastructure.

Urban praxis is always conducted in a concrete urban space. How this space is dealt with and negotiated has a decisive impact on the cultural processes of appropriation and negotiation. Questions are asked such as: What history occupies this place? How is it manifested? Who is involved in narrating it and who is not? How can it be activated and critically reviewed?

As part of a panel at the conference "Urban Praxis. New Contexts for Cultural Infrastructures", we talked to four scholars and/or curators about their perspectives on remembering as part of the negotiation process in urban places. We shifted the focus of urban praxis to artistic and institutional, self-organizing and delegated processes dealing with history and memory, in the context of which methods of actualizing, appropriating, regenerating, and creating the public sphere are continually being applied. We ask: What sites are being occupied and negotiated? Which fields of knowledge are shaping these processes? Where do different fields of expertise come together? Which analog and digital channels are conveying these processes? What facets are being revealed? In this new context of (multi-disciplinary) urban design, the transformation of urban spaces poses multi-faceted challenges.

In four commentaries, our panelists provide different perspectives on the issue of contemporary and historical strategies of appropriation, the cultural urban spaces involved, and their institutions and actors, based on their inquiries and the findings of their research.

Focusing on the example of the architectural reconstruction of the National Theater in Munich, Marie-Charlott Schube outlines how the theater-building mission generates various public spheres in the urban context which, however, exclude mainstream urban society. She addresses the questions thus raised about the extent to which theater-building and practices of theater-use are, or have the potential to be, part of the urban space by reviewing current activities in and around the Schauspiel Wuppertal.

Pablo Santacana López considers remembering as a form of embodiment in the performative practice of reenactment. Taking Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave* as an example, he inquires into the potential of artistic practice to renegotiate historiography.

Julia Kurz focuses on the exhibition *Beyond the L*, which she co-curated at the Stadtgeschichtliches Museum Leipzig, to explore remembrance practice as conducted by museums – institutions and sites of urban negotiation. She observes and criticizes a tendency towards controlling remembrance to promote a specific identity, which leave many blanks and omissions, and contrasts it with examples of a more diverse approach to confronting the colonial and anti-Semitic cultural heritage of the city of Leipzig.

Analysing the example of *Initiative 19. Februar Hanau*, Marianna Liosi discusses how the public sphere is produced in urban spaces and online, and to what extent the boundaries between these spheres are becoming increasingly blurred. She considers how remembering (in the sense of both mourning and attributing responsibility) creates and shapes the public sphere and, specifically where online/offline participation is concerned, can become a form of activism.

These four commentaries show the diversity of urban memory practices and how they open debate on urban space. The artistic and curatorial actions they address reveal new perspectives and renegotiate urbanity. They range from the historical practice of architectural reconstruction that is still pursued today; to a fascination with making historical events realistically tangible; the demands of the museum as a history-making institution and a space for discourse; and the negotiation of commemoration between virtual and physical space. Urban spaces are co-created in the light of the different levels on which these practices take place.