Struggle of the Urban Identity in Berlin: Creation and Debate of Humboldt Forum

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Berlin is a unique case study in the field of urban research, especially with its ongoing reconstruction from the Second World War and German Reunification. Its rebuilding of major historic landmarks and monuments has brought considerable international attention in regards to the repurposing of these sites and their architectural designs. Although not uncommon in Europe to recreate former notable buildings and cultural spaces, it does have particular special meaning for the citizens of Berlin. Some places are rooted closely to the division of the city in the Cold War era, between German Democratic Republic (GDR) and German Federal Republic (DBR). Most significant example is the Berlin City Palace, which was destroyed by the GDR for its Palace of the Republic. Both had historic and cultural meaning for the residents of Berlin, whom were divided with the reunification on what should be done to this place. This was furthered with the revelation that the Palace of the Republic was contaminated with asbestos. In November 2003 the former GDR parliament building was torn down, and three years later on April 23, 2007, the approval was given to reconstruct the Berlin City Palace. Of course, being the main point of this paper, this was not going to be the same palace of Hohenzollern dynasty. Rather it will be an unusual mixture of modern architecture (interior and back) and reconstructed frontal-body façade of Baroque. This new recreated palace will be known as the “Humboldtforum”, a third compromised way that attempts to accommodate the two competing groups for this urban space. However, to current time of this writing in August, 2016, little has been studied by scholars on the future impact of new palace will have on the collective memory of current generations of youth-young adults (those born after the reunification of Germany in 1990) and the effects of globalization will have on the site. With examining the major scholarly works related to the reconstructing palace and effects of globalization on decision making to this urban spaces, this paper hopes to present a clear Histography and case study to this overall development. This reflects to the overall transformative era Berlin is going through, and how the city will define itself on the world stage.

This Histography will not be able to show full complexity regarding the struggle of urban identity in Berlin. Its emphasis is to show the progression and differing arguments by scholars related to the construction of Berlin Humboldtforum. Most of them address this site as the reconstruction of “Berlin City Palace”, however in my work I shall not consider it as such. Not that it is a “modern palace” for the city in terms of being a new center for cultural studies and sciences, but it has no political purposes as its former predecessors. It should be stated that this
new palace will not have any reconstructed interior rooms of the former imperial-royal palace or the palace of republic. The argument presented by its reconstruction supporting group, “Association Berliner Schlosses E.V.”, is that many of these former rooms were used as civil servant offices and workplaces that would be too many to reconstruct. However the modern space will serve both its new role assigned by the German government, and leave room for possible recreation of certain historic rooms in the later future with available funding.¹ This new facility will be a modern the non-western museum containing the collection of Ethnological Museum, which is currently in Dalhem near the Free University of Berlin. Additionally, the Humboldtforum will be an inner-city conference center, important to display to esteem foreign guests the globalize character of Berlin. This is part of a greater scheme for the reconstruction work being done on Museum Island, positioning itself in the near future as one of major cultural centers in the post-Cold War Europe.² While scholars have debated on this subject as early as the late 1990s, their views did adjust and change with each formal decision made by the city of Berlin and German parliament. In particular, I shall discuss the written works of Allan Cochrane and Andrew Johnson, “Reimagining Berlin: World City, National Capital or Ordinary Place?”, Susanne Ledanff, “The Palace of the Republic versus the Stadtschloss”, Didem Ekici, “The Surfaces of Memory in Berlin: Rebuilding Schloß”, Uta Staiger’s, “Cities, citizenship, contested cultures: Berlin’s Palace of the Republic and the politics of the public sphere”, Friedrich von Bose’s “The Making of Berlin’s Humboldt-Forum: Negotiating History and the Cultural Politics of Place”, and Adam Sharr’s, “Selective Memory: Contesting Architecture and Urbanism at Potsdam’s Stadtschloss and Alter Markt”. These selected pieces reflect a sampling of debate that is still going on amongst academics in regards to the construction of Humboldtforum and greater urban redevelopment in Berlin area. While this will be centered on the works written in English for the global scholarly audience, there are certainly several articles and publications on the subject in German. Due to my limited ability to read in this language, I shall not venture in this for the time being in the Histography. Taking from my brief academic sessions on Urban Studies & Architecture in Berlin, at the Free University, I hope to display some of the collective student discussion presented in these courses. Even prior to this, the International Summer School of

Graz (Seggau) encourage for the investigation and research to this topic in terms of greater
global implications. Although it is easy to express one’s own scholarly opinion related to this
subject, it should none the less acknowledge the ongoing struggle that many Berliners face
regarding reunification and self-identity with globalization. All this must be taken to
consideration and treated with the upmost respect.

At the turn of the 2000s, Allan Cochrane and Andrew Jonas, composed an investigative
article concerning the reconstruction of Berlin. At the time, only nine years since the
Reunification of Germany in 1990, there was considerable speculation on the future image of the
city. Debates concerning the reconstruction of Berlin City Palace had yet to really gain any
sizable attention or was an immediate concern by city leaders. Rather, attention was on how the
new German capital would be an active center of globalization. The emergence of sheer modern
architectural space of Potsdamer Platz and restored/redesigned Reichstag impressed a new
concept of historic preservation and urban planning, where buildings could retain their original
façade or the space entirely created in a new global image. The struggle of identity between,
local, national, and continental had become apparent in Berliners, especially those who had
limited experience with the division between East & West Germany. As authors expressed in
presenting the importance of this case study for urban scholars;

“Berlin is a particularly interesting example of a city which is seeking (indeed being
forced) to reposition itself in the global arena, in the wake of a dramatic restructuring of
global politics. Not only does it face the task of reinserting itself into a wider set of
regional, national and international processes which are presently in a state of flux, but at
local level it also has to recreate itself as a united city. The latter task is especially
problematic for a city which since World War II has been divided not simply by local
jurisdictional but also by fundamental political boundaries. Thus, as globalization puts
the issue of urban entrepreneurialism onto the political agenda, Berlin must find ways of
transcending the legacies of division created by past global political arrangements.”

This statement is crutch of main focus of their article, where they show the difficult struggle of
urban planners, architects, and city administrators to find an appropriate balance between the
rapidly globalize world and remembrance to a turbulent history. As capital of Germany, Berlin
has significant importance to international impression on the German culture and nationality,
which had been divided by the Cold War politics. However, especially after the Reunification,

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there is a certain emphasis to reimagine Berlin as multi-cultural center of Europe, similar to that of pre-World War and Weimar era (periods of major cultural, economic, and political wealth). Of course, the other selected articles will cover more in-depth the more recent struggle of collective memory and city identity, but this work does set an early pretense to the scholarly research in this topic.

Cochrane’s and Jonas’ work is carefully to break down the then newest urban developments in Berlin, with particular focus on Potsdamer Platz. Although Berlin never assume the role as the finical capital of Germany, it did none the less experience the transfer of many Federal ministries from Bonn, Germany. It also resonated as center of culture and tourism, which the latter is its main source of income. However, as the article notes, the city has one of slowest growing economies in Germany, and massive debt occurred from its aggressive reconstruction policies. It mentioned that there is an assumed belief that a new normality would emerge integrating it into an international status; “The widespread assumption after reunification appears to have been that it was now all back to history, ‘as usual’, which meant Berlin would somehow be able to reclaim a past (albeit imaginary) status as a world city.”4 This remark is important to understand the greater context of the “Berlin City Palace debate”, where this prevailing ideal is in constant clash with reality of past. In the use of example of Potsdamer Platz, the authors argued that it was a break with the past of the urban identity of this space in the city. In its original heyday, this area was the commercial center of this city and was entirely destroyed in the Second World War. It was also empty space with the division of the city by Ally powers, and later Berlin Wall. The reconstruction of this commercial district was a major progression in refinement of architectural style of the German Capital. Its sheer size also presented a new monumental symbol for reunified Berlin; “Although there are now building sites all over the new core of the city, the Potsdamer Platz development (which stretches into the Leipziger Platz) is certainly the biggest… International architects (such as I.M., Pei, Richard Rogers, and Helmut Jahn) have been drawn in to design a series of prestige office buildings, constructing a vision which sets out to define Berlin as world city with buildings like those of other world cities.”5 This is very important to the redefining of the cultural image of Berlin, being progressive and innovative than trap in the memory of a city that was majority destroyed. The written images

4 Allan Cochrane & Andrew Jonas, 148.
5 Ibid, 149.
given in the gives a visual aid to understand the sharp difference it is from original 1930s commercial center. Today, which authors would have limited envisionnement, is gleaming center of skyscrapers and modern architecture masterpieces, like Samsung Center.

One central issue that this article has is the assumption that would become a European Service Center, a major industrial center, or regional center for East Germany. Surprisingly, none of these things did occur in twenty-five year period from its publication. Rather, did become a major cultural and political center in Germany, and to greater extent Central Europe. It is still nowhere near the ability to rival that of London or Paris, though certainly has comparable topography of size. Similarly, the endorsement of redistribution of state own property in former East Berlin was also ill perceived; “The incorporation of former eastern half of the city is beginning to transformation it in subtle as well as dramatic ways. In the older residential areas of East Berlin, the ultimate aim is to transfer property to private ownership from forms of state ownership. The process by which this is being achieved is highly complex, because the first step is to restore ownership of property to its “rightful” owners (that is, the heirs of those from whom it was taken in Nazi and GDR periods.). Of course this is part of general attempt of redemption by the German government to right the wrong from horrors of these two repressive and brutal regimes. However, the results of this overall policy of getting rid of state own housing property was the sudden housing crisis of present. Due to the limited availability and gentrification of certain major districts, prices have skyrocketed to the point of a force rent cap by the city. Similar measures of restricting the ownership of holiday residences by non-Berliners, and having all new construction have available housing have somewhat controlled the situation. It cannot be said that the authors would have known that these possible issues were a likely possibility. Rather, the article should be taken in merit as an insightful piece of urban scholarship on the hopeful desire for Berlin to be an active participant in the modern global community.

An important piece of the early 2000s regarding the debate on the decision of reconstruction of Berlin City Palace, Susanne Ledanff’s article “The Palace of the Republic versus the Stadtschloss” reflects a balance approach to the collective memory of this urban place.

6 Ibid, 159.
Her main focus is the struggle to create a new building that could fill the void in the city center, which emerged with reunification and fall of the Berlin Wall. For many East Berliners, the site is both reminiscent to the success and failure of the German Democratic Republic. To those in the West, the site was seen as ideal to recreate either the former Hohenzollern Palace or a new reunification memorial. Ledanff bases her writing in the greater international scholarly works relate to the urban and architectural planning of monumental and memorial sites. In her regard to the public discussion of time; “As examination of the Schlossplatz debate is instructive in this respect, because it involved questions of how traumatic or distorted history can be commemorated in concrete architectural forms and what form the symbolic architecture in the center of Germany’s capital should take.”

Indeed this presents the foundation to the rest of work, where Ledanff carefully breaks down the three major competing group’s proposals. For her, their spatial memory is central to her case study and ultimately to their willingness to accept any decision made by the German Parliament. Although she considers the main discussion based on a more mundane dispute of Preservation vs. Recreation between West & East Berliners, there is considerable value to this in understanding the eventual compromise that is Humboldtforum. Ledanff makes valid point in regards to the overall issue regarding the Germans desire to rebuild their past that reflects the positive or specific image than the whole account; “There seems to be no need for a broader picture other than Germ self-preoccupations with their past. In culture studies, this has triggered an almost hypnotic fascination with questions of identity and the commemoration of traumatic history in Germany in Berlin’s new buildings.”

This is concerning aspect to the reconstruction of Berlin as whole, which Ledanff uses the term of “Holocaust centered discourse” from Brian Ladd and “Disneyfication” of Luta Koepnick in regards to this failing. These terms portray Berlin, though, in split view where it is constantly reminded of its association to the Third Reich of Germany, while at the same time trying emphasize it as place of the Prussian Enlightenment and cultural predominance from the 18th to early 20th century.

Although Susanne Ledanff’s article “The Palace of the Republic versus the Stadtschloss” presents a detailed overview concerning this controversial debate, it does certainly has its

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9 Ledanff, 37
objectionable points. With works prior to the official decision by the German Parliament in 2007 concerning the future of this urban place, it does present a speculative nature by the author. Ledanff admits that her work was only to describe the debate of two palaces and other options with the plans of reconstruction. She emphasizes about her main sources for this paper; “This article was written during a period when media reports suggested that prestigious monument planning and theoretical debates on “memory architectures” were constrained by finical concerns.”¹¹ Value of these immediate press material is beneficial for a descriptive account of the debates at that moment, however there is certainly an immediate bias imposed by the media sources used. Views and opinions of the different news agency vary per publisher, which any complaints about finical costs could have been exaggerated to appease their reading audience. Despite these criticisms, it is correct from the author that there has been, and still is, debate amongst Berliners on the cost of these monumental “memory architecture” projects, which has deepened with the massive debt the city has occurred in its reconstruction. Ledanff does state her own position relating to the dissentient for the cost of this rebuilding of palace;

“The argument that no money remains should not be taken as a cynical conclusion of the latest development of the debate over the site. Therefore, the stagnation or even failure of the plans for the Schlossplatz should be considered once again from the angle of the experts-the planners, architectural critics, even the politicians: what can still be realistically achieved in the future, how can one understand the dilemma of so many visions and debates without a satisfying outcome, at the present moment and retrospectively.”¹²

This pessimistic view ultimately provided wrong with the compromised decision made to build the Humboldt forum. Despite apparent short coming and general assumption, Ledanff presents a valid point in that the heated debates and sharp division made any reconstruction of this urban place difficult. Of course, other authors would consider this careful with the concept of “memory architecture”, something that is essential in appreciating the cultural significance of this building.

In 2007, Didem Ekici published her scholarly work in the *Journal of Architectural Education* on the debate regarding the reconstruction of Berlin City Palace or preservation of GDR Palace of the Republic. Although it has been nine years of rapid decision making concerning the future of this urban place by the government of Germany, it has considerable weight in regards of shared memory. Ekici makes a clear underlining remark to the importance

¹¹ Ibid, 63-64
¹² Ibid, 65
of what rebuilding the Berlin City Palace means on global stance; “One question that emerges in this context is how the historic reconstructions might undermine the collective memory of urban space, not only through distorting the original meanings associated with reconstructed buildings but also by creating an illusion of continuity between the present and a selected past – in this case a Prussian past – thus reducing the multiple layers of urban space to a linear narrative.”¹³

This statement is critical for this Histography and future research on this critical topic, regardless of it being in Berlin or any other city around the globe. What makes this important, and adds validity to prior scholarly works on the reconstruction of Berlin, is that it pulls on the challenge of choosing to remember two historic nations, that of GDR and Prussia. Both left significant scares in the memories of German people, especially with the World Wars and division by Ally powers. By trying to pursue a selective memory, as Ekici argues in his introduction and the greater writing of this piece, it threatens to diminish the cultural identity of the urban space in Berlin. By simply rebuilding a historic site and then repurposing it for a modern facility of government, education, culture, and ect., it removes any true memory that this urban place has. In greater context, this what has occurred in Berlin with other major historic sites, like Reichstag, Zeughaus, and Hamburger Bahnhof, all of which retain their semi-original façade but have completely modern interiors with often completely different use than originally created for. The Humboldt Forum, though, takes this to a new level, where it’s an entirely new reconstructed building trying to reclaim historic heritage.

Of course, there is also an important issue with the destruction of the Palace of Republic, which its own collective memory and shared identity by East German-Berliners. As Ekici presents in his article, majority of them did not want to destroy the Palace of Republic, seeing the positive impacts of the GDR socialist agenda and it being the spot of agreement for reunification with Federal German Republic (aka West Germany). However, what he claims is the rational to demolition of this historic site is the general lack of aesthetic appeal and possible symbolism of the division between East & West Germany. This though was argued heavily by architects, whom desired the possible opportunity to either recreate the historic baroque palace or new

modern monument on the Museum Island. Ekici quotes the former Berlin municipal building
director, Barbara Jakubeit, on this general disdain to the Palace of Republic in 1996;

“It is an urbanistic problem. One can’t get rid of the Palace of Republic for ideological
reasons. It is not that it’s so ugly that we have to tear it down. We would drown in rubble
if we were tear down everything in the Federal Republic that is not beautiful. But in such
an important place, one must be concerned about the urbanistic concept. And this
building simply totally wrong for the site.”14

Similarly to other advocates for the reconstruction of Berlin City Palace gave comparable
response like to that of Jakubeit. What is important though for this argument is the indication of
how the prevailing belief of continuity of architectural style of 18th-19th century prevailed over
the historical remnants of the GDR. The idealizations by advocates that restoring the former
glory of Unter the Linden and Museum Island would emphasize the cultural preeminence of
Berlin, which the Second German Empire resonated in the turn of twentieth century. Of course,
this was selective memory, disregarding the downfalls of this era or the modernist tradition of
Bauhaus era in Weimar Republic. However, the change of public opinion from identifying with
the Palace of the Republic to the idea of Reconstruction was spurred on with the art installation
of “The Schloß?”. This showcase former grandeur of Prussian Royal-Imperial Palace, which
draped over the abandon Palace of the Republic in 1993. Although largely popular with
Berliners, the main directors, historian Goerd Peschken and architect Frank Augustin, did not
wanted a literal rebuilding of this urban place;

“We originally conceived the façade for this installation of the Schloß in the urban space
quite differently from what is seen today. It was not designed to underscore the huge
mass of the building… but rather to create a subtle distortion of visual effect with its
different facet…. The building to be erected might… show the fully intact structure when
looking from the Lustgarten with the aid of optical or electronic means, or both. A glass
façade could be animated in such a way that passers-by would see, depending on their
position, either the intact Schloß or its ruins.”15

What both designers did not realize that their desired ideal for the redevelopment of this urban
place would be manipulated by those seeking to have a rebuilt Berlin City Palace. Indeed, the

14 Quoted from Michael Z. Wise, Capital Dilemma: Germany’s Search for a New Architecture for Democracy, 1st
Rebuilding the Schloß”, 27.
Author additionally quoted from A. Balfour, Berlin, 135, and S. Boym, The Future of Nostalgia, 192. Cited from
popularity of their public art exhibition created quite considerable global awareness to this reconstruction debate. However, as Ekici argues, this lacked any really public memory and, with the official decision of 2002, an empty façade that neither reflected the pre-1914 era in Berlin or present German identity of reunified nation.

It’s particularly important to note in this work, Ekici’s criticism of the leading architect of Humboldt Forum, Wilhelm von Boddien. The head of the rebuilding project disregarded the established criticism by both scholars and architects in field of lack authenticity this site will have on the cityscape of Berlin. As author quotes the response to this issue;

“Again and again there are arguments as so whether one should rebuild such totally destroyed structures. Opponents of this project toss around not exactly accurate terms such as “clone”, “Disneyland”, or “Las Vegas”. How unjustified they are, is shown by… buildings that have been reconstructed true to their originals and which bear witness to the reclaimed historical identity of famous cities. Often the reconstructions does not occur immediately after loss. Political or also economic conditions prevent it.”16

In respect to Boddien, he presents a fairly decent case in fact that the entire city of Berlin was destroyed by the Second World War and modernization efforts by both West & East German city governments. It is also true that Berlin is trying immensely hard to reassert itself as one of major capitals of Europe, and rebuilding its historic downtown is part of this overall pursuit. Similarly, the rebuilding of Berlin City Palace would not be an uncommon project in Germany, with the rebuilt Dresden Royal Castle showing the success of recreating a former historic building from nothing (Appendix 1-2). However, Ekici is dismissive to this claim and presents a similar position of other prior scholars in challenging this ideal as detrimental to the overall public memory. It also promotes a terrible possibility of trying to dispel or minimalize the past of Germany, especially that of horrors of Nazi regime. The author does presents her personal view and position at the end of this work; “The Palace of Republic fell prey to the politics of national heritage. Its site, which could remain empty for years given the enormous cost of rebuilding the Schloß, is yet another topography of traces reminding the visitor of each regime’s desire to reconstruct over the ruins of the recent past.”17 Although his predication was somewhat accurate, the Humboldt Forum is well under way today in being constructed at the cost of historical place

17 Ekici, 34.
of the Palace of Republic. This work does provide valuable context and difference from the other scholarly pieces. It does similar with the argument presented by Susanne Ledanff, with both stressing the diminishment of the overall collective memory for this urban space to Berliners. However, there difference in stance with what should fill this void is apparent, with Ledanff favoring the construction of a new unify monument for the city while Ekici preserving the GDR Palace of Republic.

Following a similar line of argument with scholars in the field, Uta Staiger’s “Cities, citizenship, contested cultures: Berlin’s Palace of Republic and politics of the public space” shows how certain urban spaces encourage public participation and voice to the planning process. The reconstruction debate surrounding the Humboldt Forum present an excellent case study to this regard, and how this is healthy part of functioning modern democracy in Germany. Staiger presents at being of her article the significance of this piece in contrast with other writings surrounding the reconstruction of Berlin; “The ‘ghosts’ or sediments of the historical memory, with which not only this site but arguably the greater part of Berlin is imbued with, have been examined in several important publications in recent years. Revisiting the debates portrayed therein about remembering and forgetting, memorialization and erasure in Berlin’s built environment, this article specifically focuses on the civic and discursive practices it elicited.” This concluding intro remark is useful on understanding the value this article brings to overall discussion on the reconstruction of Berlin, which the building of Humboldt Forum has spurred on (reason for this Histography) with so many differing positions and views on the role of public space in the urban environment. Concept itself is changing one from the effects of globalization and general residential desire for green or cultural open spaces. The author emphasizes this in her explanation of term “public space” and its relation to urban planning; “Taking its point of departure from this implicit relationship or urbanity and publicity, the following article is interested precisely in making the relationship between them explicit: it focuses on the substantive role public space as built environment might play for public sphere as discursive condition. This applies well to the overall role that Humboldt Forum, and other


19 Uta Staiger’s “Cities, citizenship, contested cultures: Berlin’s Palace of Republic and politics of the public space”, 311.
current or future reconstructed sites, will have on the cityscape. Berliners themselves have to live with what is created, and do have the digression of refusing to rebuild or keep certain places. Thus we return back to the issue of Palace of the Republic and collective memory of GDR, which attempted to define East Berlin as modern socialist city.

Although a sizeable portion of the article is on the history and established decisions made for the future of this urban place in Berlin, there are certainly some insightful remarks made by the author in regards to the division of public opinion. The debate was conflicted with the general base of the ideological lines of former East and West division. There was the general pressure to transform Berlin into a unified global city, though this seemed to be a common shared desire by the entire city populace. As Staiger explained better; “These two sides of public opinion were not, however, the only debates brought forward, nor were they belong to different rhetorical levels. One insisted on the importance of acknowledging the historical ruptures in that narrative by reclaiming the building as a witness to a bygone historical period and civic framework.”20 This itself has been common theme that has and will continue to be seen the debate of the construction of Humboldt Forum and general rebuilding of Berlin. The idealization of past presents concern in the deluding current memory of the GDR and the tragedies of previous century. More than anything, it portrays a nostalgia (which will be discussed later in this paper) towards the German Empire and even the Kingdom of Prussia. Staiger does cover an interesting aspect of the prior Palace of the Republic in its last years before demolition to build the new Humboldt Forum. The empty building was used as public gallery for art and creative endeavors, representing vibrant artistic culture in Berlin. The author explains this unique temporary identity as separate break from either of pursued narratives imposed on this urban place;

“the Volkspalast strove to make the public reassert their claim to this specific urban site, and rethink the already agreed demolition of palace by physically engaging with the result of urban public planning process and public demands. The empty building became literally an in-between space: a temporary venue hinged between past and future and lodged between the stagnating poles of the debate. In the process, it embraced a critical (if not always self-critical) utopia set apart from either of foundational discourses, hoping to promote ambiguity, process and contradiction over and against cohesive identity narratives…”21

20 Ibid, 318.
21 Ibid, 320.
Indeed, this an idealize hope by both author and those involved in attempted repurposing of the Palace of the Republic, or as they briefly called it “Volkspalast”. However, this was in vain to the public demand of select group to recreate the former historic 18th century imperial palace, which its own identity is a rejection to modernism and urban creativism. Staiger, herself, aligns well with the majority of other scholars and critics in seeing the recreation as fundamentally flawed.

In terms of the democratic process and culture surrounding the Humboldt Forum project, this is a debatable subject. While Staiger takes a neutral, or even holistic approach to this aspect, the other included on this paper have either not mentioned this or generally been critical of elitism surrounding the main supporting group for reconstruction. As the author expresses her hope on the issue about this future public-urban space; “It is in this manner that the installation of doubt, in its theoretical dimension or in terms of interim use, may correlate to a common urban ground as both setting and symbol. While not affording civic consensus, it may have offered space for the ongoing negotiation between relevant, parities regarding the legitimacy of public intervention, the possibility of civic identity formation, and the coping with uncomfortable pasts threatening to remake the future.”22 Although sadly the creation of Humboldt Forum breaks away from possible public consensus, there is still the possibility that this site will be seen as unifying monument of Berlin. In terms of understanding the concept of public, Staiger’s article is a practical case study in otherwise complicated subject that varies around the world. Her concluding statement on the purpose of this article is important to the overall understanding of reconstruction of Berlin and its former royal-imperial city palace;

“Though the case of Berlin’s Palace of the Republic and its institutions across public discourses, this article has aimed to portray the contemporary city as a folio, on which debates over citizenship and democracy are inscribed. It has also aimed to show how public space in cities is increasingly understood as a political space, which is regulated and contested, and intimately relates to questions of political legitimacy. Third, the public site and its cultural use analysed here betrayed features of a complex and not necessarily resolvable matter, which initiated a debate about how citizens felt represented aesthetically as well as politically.”23

This great summary and overall point to this interesting article, which certainly adds volume to the complex scholarly research on the reconstruction of Berlin City Palace. It also underlines the

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22 Ibid, 324.
23 Ibid, 324.
general feeling of Berliners & Germans in having the difficult choice of building Humboldt Forum, which shows how they want the world see their capital.

One of the most recent works published concerning the construction of Humboldt Forum is Friedrich von Bose’s “The Making of Berlin’s Humboldt-Forum: Negotiating History and the Cultural Politics of Place”. Although this piece is an unusual choice for journal on such topics, *Darkmatter in the Ruins of Imperial Culture*, it’s still none the less a scholarly writing that is part of greater literature collection regarding the reconstruction of Berlin. Bose does follow a similar line of thought with other prior scholarships on the Humboldt Forum, and architectural-urban debate on choice of this plan than the other desired proposals (that of reconstructing the entire Berlin City Palace or preserving the Palace of the Republic). However, what makes this piece unique is the fact that it focuses on the future repurposing for the museum of Non-Western cultures, and redefining of this urban place from its political-historic heritage. This separation from the mainstream debate is important, since other prior research has only debated the consequences of destroying the collective memory of this site. As Bose positions himself in contrast to other scholars in field, he presents the more recent acceptance and disapproval of plan use for this place in Berlin;

“In light of the many public criticism, the experts commission’s advice to make Palace Square a place for the “world cultures” has enabled the plan of reconstruction to gain greater momentum. The idea to move the non-European collections into a reconstructed Prussian palace vis-à-vis the world famous site for the exhibition of the arts of European civilization, Museum Island, seems to have given the project its ultimate legitimization. However, the plan comes with its own very set of problems and only increases the problematics of investing in reconstruction of a 19th century architectural ensemble. In the past years, ethological museums have been subjected to increased critical scrutiny by activists and scholars from a range of disciplines such as history and anthropology. As a result of these criticism there has been much reflection in the field of museum studies, often followed by paradigmatic shifts in the museums themselves. How can we make sense of the making of the Humboldt-Forum in light of these developments?”

This in itself of the core this article, and Bose’s challenge to the value of building the Humboldt-Forum, which shows a level non-value in either major fields of History or Anthropology. Despite this, though, there is a concession that this does fit into the established identity of Museum

Island, which critics have not given general credence too. In many ways, it expands the international collection of historic objects that has made this area of Berlin famous. Of course, the choice of this type of museum raise several considerable issues that this article addresses considerably well that other scholarly works have not till this point.

With focus on the future content of Humboldt-Forum’s main museum collection, Bose present a unique new relation not discussed before by scholars. While it’s common knowledge that Second German Empire was one of major colonial powers at the turn of 20th century, little thought is taken by international scholars to vast collecting of anthropological objects by German explorers and archeologists in this period. This is the core of historical objects on Museum Island today, especially at the Pergamon, Neu & Alt Museum, and Bose Museum. Thus, in practical sense, the future collection at the Humboldt-Forum would be a general expansion of this spatial identity. However, Bose points out that there is conflicting nature of having this museum at this location and recent past of Germany;

“Especially with regard to the ethnological collections, which compares about 500,000 objects and constitute, by far, the larger part of the two Dahlem museums, there seems to be a further fundamental contradiction at play. On the one hand, they have been subject to numerous historical studies that have shown the colonial background of large parts of collections: Especially after beginning of Germany’s colonial rule in African continent, which dates from the Berlin Africa Conference in 1884/85, the colonial infrastructure served as very basis for assuming large parts of the present-day African collections… However, in reducing the colonial implications of the history of ethnographic collecting and exhibiting to the complex and often violent practices of acquisition, one risks losing sight of an epistemic aspect: Even though ethnology stood in an uneasy relationship to the popular spectacles of live exhibits of people brought from the colonies, the “Völkerschauen” [33], its practices of knowledge production must nevertheless be seen as part of a regime of repression in which the cultures on display were constructed ‘Other’ to the civilized, culturally advanced European ‘Self’.25

What this presents is a darker side to having a diverse Non-Western collection, which was taken by force by German Colonialists. Although this was common practice amongst European colonial powers, it has especially had a troubling connection to the horrific actions and looting by the Nazis’ in their rapid conquest throughout Europe (especially for the victims, like the Jews). It also inadvertently emphasizes the imperial past of German Monarchy, which the

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Humboldt-Forum was sold as consolatory break from both the original royal Prussian palace and GDR parliament. However, there is challenge of future use and reshaping identity for the common theme of Museum Island.

Of course, central issue covered in this examination of practical purpose of the Humboldt-Forum is the role of how a museum can play cultural identifier in the urban space. Bose goes to considerable depth in his writing to evaluate the changing nature of role of museums, especially those in the ethnographic category. While this newly built palace would be both a remembrance to the historical prestige of both Prussia & German Empire, it will also have difficulty of being perceived as new imperialist symbol of Germany. Bose expresses this apparent growing issue well in his assessment of relating changes in the museums studies to the development of Humboldt-Forum:

“The discourse about the Humboldt-Forum so far reveals exactly this problematics: we can see as engagement with the notions of dialogue and multiperspectivity while at same time we do not find much of a critical foundation view upon the histories of epistemic disclosure of the ‘Other’, of (colonial) exchange and entanglement – histories, which lie at the heart of the modern project of ethnological collecting and exhibiting. As a result, the notion of multiperspectivity becomes devoid of much of its possibly critical potential. The chances of addressing those histories, however, are many manifold, yet with their very own methodological implications and difficulties. They can certainly bring with them the necessity to further the debate about what role institutions hosting ethnographic collections could and should play in the present context; a context, in which colonial history is just slowly becoming an issue of public debate and a matter of reflection regarding a postcolonial politics of remembrance within and outside the museum.”

What this section presents is an area of political remembrance that has not been in the general public discussion before, being of Germany’s colonial era and its aggressive looting of non-western objects. As previously mentioned, Germans have considerable remembrance and acceptance to their role in terms of Holocaust and brutality in the World Wars, but taking responsibility for this will present an entirely new challenge to confront this country and its people. Similarly, with mixing so many different cultural and historic aspects in one building presents the difficulty of not simplifying already complex identity. In the long term this will be an interesting area of further research, especially if there is a greater city or national discussion concerning colonial activities of turn 20th century and respectful taste consideration to these

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unmentioned victims of European imperialism (of course this will possible resonate with other countries like France, Spain, Italy, and United Kingdoms).

In many ways the article written by Bose is a good indicator of direction future urban scholars will take in examining the role and impact of Humboldt-Forum will have on Berlin. Differing from the works of Didem Ekici and Susanne Ledanff, it did not focus on if either the Berlin City Palace or Palace of the Republic should or could have been a better choice for this urban space. Rather, it presents a case where the decision of having Humboldt-Forum be a museum for non-western historic and anthropological objects will possible create a new heated debate on Germany’s role in Colonialism and if it does bear responsibility to the destruction of certain African and Asian cultures. Although this remains a speculative concern, it does raise new questions on how a recreated historic monument can be change from its entire original identity to something controversial by simply repurposing it to a museum or other cultural, commercial, educational, and/or governmental facility. Bose concluding remarks in his work presents this difficult aspect as potential beneficial for researchers in understanding the complex nature of cultural politics in the German capital;

“For debates about the future of European metropolitan museums holding ethnographic collections, the Humboldt-Forum’s planning process plays a significant role and will increasingly do so in the course of near future. And this is not despite of, but because of its combining of the historical particulars of Berlin’s Palace Square debates, the broader institutional logics at play and more general trends in the institutional handling of vast ethnographic collections of Western museums. The Humboldt-Forum’s planning process therefore serves as an interesting and important site for the analysis of both the local specificities of Berlin as well as the more general trends in the cultural politics at Western museums at play; a politics that is saturated with collective memories and cultural imaginaries however divergent they may be.”

Indeed, this near closing statement gives sense of the challenges to come in regards to greater management of ethnographic historic collections in Europe, but specifically at the future Humboldt-Forum. The planning for this palace is truly confronted by numerous issues that are spurred on by the collective memories of Berliners & Germans and the ambitions of city leaders in making the city an international center of culture. Regardless, this article is a great addition to the overall international scholarly discussion-debate. It should be also noted that Bose is a

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German scholar and is in the process of publishing his PhD dissertation on this particular topic (at the time of this writing).

While most international attention has spent on focusing on the reconstruction of Berlin City Palace, little attention has been brought upon a similar project in the adjacent city of Potsdam with its Stadtschloss. Personally I have been to the city in both pleasure and academic field work, seeing for myself the process of removing the buildings from GDR republic for the restored baroque city. It is a place of significant importance in preservation of Prussian history, with palaces and other historic buildings-spaces from this vanish state (appendix 3-5). While part of the field excursion (coordinated by the Free University of Berlin, under Dr. Gernot Weckherlin), I was given the brief opportunity to meet with a representative of local opposition in regards to the reconstruction agenda of Potsdam. Although the Stadtschloss was already completed with St. Nicholas Church and its public square, there was still an effort to prevent further demolishment of other GDR buildings. The main argument presented was that these structures were still functioning and served a real purpose for the city and its populace. Recreation of Alter Market and grounds of Stadtschloss were seen as wasteful public spending by the primarily conservative Brandenburg legislative. However, to my personal bias in favoring classical architecture and touring of the city, I did find the argument rather weak and generally un-moving. Potsdam is generally well define by Baroque and Neoclassical architecture, which restoring its historic downtown in this similar style is an understandable route. The difficulty, like that in Berlin, is finding an appropriate balance of recreating historic monuments and places with those that are there from GDR or more post-modernist style of present reunified Germany.

In examining this subject further, Adam Sharr’s, “Selective Memory: Contesting Architecture and Urbanism at Potsdam’s Stadtschloss and Alter Markt”, gives a detailed study on the effort to recreate the historic 18th century architecture and urban space in former Prussian summer capital. Although this work was written prior to the completed construction of Stadtschloss (finished in 2013), it still none the less gives an impression of considerable process that it takes to create a modern urban masterplan from a prior historic place. It also serves as a rejection to the forceful architectural style of GDR, which shifted from German Monumentalism too Socialist Modernism. Sharr makes his article relate to the more internationally debate construction of Humboldt Forum, which Potsdam’s Stadtschloss has similar driving motivation;
“The replacement of the bronze-glazed Palast der Republik with a structure that is so brazenly historicist remains the most high-profile of a series of similar projects across the city which share similar motivations. It can be read in multiple ways: as contributing to the reconstruction of Berlin as a major European city; as restoring the dignity of a UNESCO World Heritage Centre ravaged by war and destruction; as purging an unsavory period in Berlin’s and Germany’s history; or as articulating civic values which find more appeal in the image of Prussian militarism than the image of the present.”

The last point made by Sharr in regards to Prussian militarism (though more in terms of architectural style than culture) is a driving aspect in the reconstruction of Potsdam, which resonates in one of the very few places were this former state is still visible. Sharr’s introduction of Potsdam and its main historic center is also reflective of what visitors see upon entering the city from either Potsdam Palace’s gardens or main city station. The author emphasizes main effort to restore this area before the post-War destruction by the GDR, particularly in city the rejection to failed modernist styles of late 1960s-1980s. He particularly notes the moral importance for city populace to recreation process; “The new project for the Stadtschloss and Alter Markt is frequently perceived as a symbol of Potsdam’s resurgence, reinstating a sense of civic community”. Indeed, this simplistic hope that is being pursued with the urban planning to this rebuilding process, though in reality, as this work will show, it far more contentious and complicated.

In the defense of the architectural style of GDR, Sharr does express that it is unreasonable to entirely destroy these buildings from this era. Similar to the situation throughout most of East Germany at this current time, there is an attempt to dispel this part of recent history and memory from the cityscape. Sharr makes valid point that this is common reality throughout the world with rapid urbanization; “The demolition of Potsdam’s Stadtschloss – and the dense urban fabric of which it was part – to make way for a modern layout should be seen against a diversity of approaches stimulations across east and west.” This makes clear that despite the clear effort by the GDR to break from past, it was not alone in this pursuit in being followed with most of the


world at the time. Although it’s a pleasant thought to consider that the reconstruction of Potsdam is part of a greater effort in restoring the lost legacy from the destruction in both Second World War and GDR reign, it must be taken to account there is a finical motive. The city is a popular tourist attraction outside of Berlin, drawing crowds to famous Sanssouci park and Cecilienhof palace (the site of Potsdam Conference in 1945). As Sharr puts more specifically in terms of the reconstruction of the Stadtschloss;

“The classical image of the Stadtschloss serves the tourist industry which now supports Potsdam’s economy… The construction system of the project serves to deliver the required image while also delivering on construction management priorities of economy, flexibility, and commercial optimisation. A more literal reconstruction, whether or not it would be desirable, and whether or not it would be desirable, and whether or not it could accommodate the needs of the Brandenburg ‘Landtag’, would be much slower and far more expensive. The resulting reconstruction is an architecture of nostalgia – but it is also a one-size-fits-all commercial architecture.”

While the initially concern about the reconstruction of the palace being either too small for Brandenburg parliament and/or taking too long construct proved false, majority of this remark is still insightful. The apparent accomplishment of meeting the demands surrounding the building to be both an efficient finical investment and representative to the overall public image of the state parliament was met swiftly by the architects. Of course, this leaves a desirable model for the Humboldt Forum, which too struggles with similar challenges but much larger international scale of representation.

The subject of reconstruction of Berlin and its famous monuments & spaces will continue to be an important case study in field of urban planning and studies for many years to come. While the focus on the Humboldt Forum will eventually wain in academic interest, it still none the less presents an interesting example of complex history of the urban space in the German capital. Issues regarding public memory and respect to the legacy of German Democratic Republic will continue to be a challenge to the emerging modern identity of new Berliners. More than anything, the literature related to this topic will continue to grow and diversify. I was personally grateful to have been given the opportunity to have studied and researched in Berlin, a place with such youthful and dynamic energy that rivals no other. Transformative and transgressive nature of this city is hallmark of globalization, both for its positive and negative features.

31 Ibid, 409
Appendix 1 & 2

Alexander Cline, Dresden Castle and Skyline, August 14, 2016
Appendix 3 – 5

Alexander Cline, Potsdam Downtown & Restored Lake Area, August 17, 2016
Works Cited


