



Recordando a

Walter Benjamin

Justicia, Historia y Verdad. *Escrituras de la Memoria.*

III SEMINARIO INTERNACIONAL
POLITICAS DE LA MEMORIA

CENTRO CULTURAL DE LA MEMORIA HAROLDO CONTI
Buenos Aires - Argentina

Archiving Berlin's past and retaining the Ruhr's present

Ana Souto¹

Resumen:

The aim of this study is to consider whether Benjamin's theories can be applied to two different case studies in Germany: the Berlin monuments to memory (such as the Holocaust Memorial or the Museum of German History) and the updated museums of the Ruhr area (including the **Küppersmühle Museum, Duisburg**; the Zollverein Museum and the **Museum Folkwang**, Essen). By doing so two different narrations will be identified: the first one struggling with nostalgia and the idea of “renewing the old” (Berlin); the other, resisting the notion of “archiving” in its desire to look forward to the future, aiming to almost forgetting the past. These two narrations also respond to a completely different construction of regional identities in the German context. On the one hand, Berlin has an institutional obligation to respond to the demands of history, to the expectation created by the constant reproduction of images referring to a past that needs redemption. On the other had, the Ruhr area, the old industrial part of Germany, needs to minimise its past in order to construct a new cultural identity. In this sense, the promotion of this area as the European Capital of Culture 2010 has been essential.

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Archiving Berlin's past and retaining the Ruhr's present

Living means leaving traces.

Walter Benjamin, 1935².

Introduction.

The aim of this paper is to consider whether Benjamin's theories can be applied to two different case studies in Germany: the Berlin monuments to memory (such as the Holocaust Memorial or the Museum of German History) and the updated museums of the Ruhr area (including the Küppersmühle Museum, Duisburg; the Zollverein Museum and the Museum Folkwang, Essen). By doing so two different narrations will be identified: the first one struggling with nostalgia and the idea of “renewing the old” (Berlin); the other, resisting the notion of “archiving” in its desire to look forward to the future, aiming to almost forgetting the past. These two narrations also respond to a completely different construction of regional identities in the German context. On the one hand, Berlin has an institutional obligation to respond to the demands of history, to the expectation created by the constant reproduction of images referring to a past that needs redemption. On the other hand, the Ruhr area, the old industrial part of Germany, needs to minimise its past in order to construct a new cultural identity. In this sense, the promotion of this area as the European Capital of Culture 2010 has been essential.

Walter Benjamin's Theses on the Philosophy of History and the essay “Edward Fuchs: Collector and Historian” will set the basis for a further analysis of the aforementioned case studies.

The architecture of Aftermath

Following Theodor Adorno and his famous sentence “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric”³, Terry Smith argues that pieces of architecture such as the Jewish Museum in Berlin by Daniel Libeskind, will inspire an “after Aftermath kind of art”, since Libeskind was able to create a “post-Auschwitz architecture, and did so

² Benjamin, Walter, “Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century”. In *Perspecta*. Vol. 12, 1969 (1935), p. 169.

³ Adorno, Theodor W., “Cultural Criticism and Society”, pp. 17-34. In *Prisms*, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1981 [1967], p. 34.



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poetically”⁴. However, since 1945 every single piece of architecture has been part of that aftermath. Whether consciously or not, architecture has been built since then to comply with the necessities of devastated areas, probably in a more prosaic way during the post-war period and from the 1980s onwards it is possible to trace an interest for a more poetical view. But both options are, nevertheless, the architecture of the aftermath, an architecture that is always taking part in the construction, reconstruction and modification of the urban landscape, always leaving a mark on the palimpsest of the city.

Heritage has become the material form of identity: a built environment which “best denotes our inescapable dependence of the past”⁵. Heritage, as Matero notes, promotes cultural continuity for its physical and irreplaceable qualities⁶; and ultimately, heritage stimulates remembering, “bringing back experiences which otherwise would have remained dormant, repressed or forgotten”⁷. Architecture, with its different styles and adaptations to the climate, geography and culture, serves as a national portrait which showcases the evolution of a country. Moreover, certain buildings, such as museums, stand for a national identity since they select and showcase relevant objects to a particular region and culture. Museums, however, are “sites where memory is artificially organised”⁸, where, as explained by Hobsbawn, identities are constructed, and invented⁹. Museums also offer an opportunity for revising memory, which would set a basis for the construction/ reconstruction of identity¹⁰. Moreover, according to Arnold de-Simine, museums are based on the display of history, rather than memory. The author explains how the main role of the former is to portray a universal image of the past on which everybody should be able

⁴ Smith, Terry, “Daniel among the philosophers. The Jewish Museum, Berlin, and architecture after Auschwitz”, pp. 137-159. In Hartonian, Gevork (ed.), *Walter Benjamin and Architecture*. Routledge, New York and Oxon, 2010, p. 142.

⁵ Lowenthal, David, “Identity, Heritage and History”. In Gillis, John R. (ed.) *Commemorations. The Politics of National Identity*. Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1994, pp. 41-57, p. 43.

⁶ Matero, Frank, “Ethics and Politics in Conservation”. *The Getty Newsletter*, 15.1, Spring, 2000.

⁷ Kwint, M., “Introduction: The Physical Past”, pp. 1-16. In Kwint, Marius, Christopher Breward and Jeremy Ainsley (ed.) *Material Memories. Design and Evocation*. Berg, Oxford, 1999, p. 2.

⁸ Crane, Susan A., *Museums and Memory*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2000, p. 6.

⁹ Hobsbawn, E. J., *Nations and Nationalism since 1780. Programme, Myth, Reality*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003 [1990], p. 10.

¹⁰ Gillis, John R. (ed.), *Commemorations. The Politics of National Identity*. Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1994, p. 3.



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to agree. In contrast, memory would involve a highly selective image of the past based on the reduction of complex episodes of the past¹¹.

Besides the museums, the rest of the built environment, permanent markers on the city, can embody not only a positive meaning, an episode in history to be proud of – heritage is also charged with negative connotations. The built environment can become a burden, a reminder of a past that is shameful, and as such, a past that forces the process of coming to terms with a difficult history and ultimately, a shaky and unstable identity. That is what Lynn Meskell has defined as “negative heritage, a conflictual site that becomes the repository of negative memory in the collective imaginary”¹². The political agency in power will decide what to do with both positive and negative heritage (erasure, preservation or revival), depending on the nature of the latter and the context in question¹³. By doing so, architecture becomes part of the power agency which transforms landscapes in order to leave or remove permanent markers which were meant to survive time¹⁴. When preserving conflicting layers on the urban palimpsest, negative heritage serves as a prompt to face the past’s liabilities, and encourages sharing responsibilities, creating, ultimately, a new and stronger identity.

In Germany, negative heritage has been a key part of the identity process since 1945, the “uniquely unspeakable Nazi past”¹⁵. The built environment related to the Third Reich was reappropriated, neglected, demolished or represented, depending on the politics of memory in place, but always surrounded by controversy. According to Fullbrook, it is possible to identify two different phases in the conservation of negative heritage. The first one, immediately after the war, promoted the disuse of iconic Nazi buildings, allowing them to fall into ruins. The main objective was to rebuild not only the built environment but a sense of normality attached later on to the German economic miracle¹⁶.

¹¹ Arnold-de Simone, Silke, *Memory Traces. 1989 and the Question of German Cultural Identity*. Peter Lang, Bern, 2005, p. 9.

¹² Meskell, Lynn, “Negative Heritage and Past Mastering in Archeology”. *Antopological Quarterly*. Vol 75, n. 3, Summer 2002, pp. 557-574, p. 558.

¹³ Eagleton, Terry, *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*. Verso, London, 1981, p. 32.

¹⁴ Findley, Lisa, *Building Change. Architecture, Politics and Cultural Agency*. Routledge, New York, 2004, p. 3.

¹⁵ Lowenthal, David, *opus cit*, p. 48.

¹⁶ Fullbrook, Mary, *German National Identity after the Holocaust*. Blackwell, United Kingdom, 1999, p. 26.



The second phase aimed to commemorate “with a heavy overlay of emotion, guilt and political bias” the past¹⁷. This phase took place later on, since it was necessary some time between the “zero hour” (1945) and the naming of the events, setting up memorials and museums, and finally, establishing the identity of the victims – a time when it was not clear whether the Nazi genocides should be represented or avoided¹⁸. This process took place at the same time as the students’ demonstrations in the 1960s, with an especial emphasis during the 1980s, the decade of commemorations¹⁹.

This obsession with remembering, moreover, with the idea of not forgetting a shameful past, brought as a consequence the proliferation of museums, memorials, commemorative plaques, the preservations of ruins, traces, etc. A common feature to all these projects would be the intention from the cultural agency in place – the government, or a private initiative – of “apology, guilt, restitution, reconciliation and profound cultural change”²⁰. However, it seems as if this multiplication of memory tools actually promotes forgetting, as discussed by James Young²¹, or at least, as Edkins pointed out, “commercialises and hence trivialises remembering”²². It is in this context in which a new category of tourist comes to the fore: it is the tourist of history, a visitor who wants to engage with the past, and up to a point, revive a cathartic experience of history, some sort of connection with the traumatic events that took place in certain conflictive spaces, such as Ground Zero in New York²³.

Two case studies have been identified for analysis in this paper, two cities that have embraced architecture in the aftermath of World War II as a way of reconstructing themselves. The built environment has supported the process of coming to terms with the past with the conservation, transformation and construction of traces, museums and memorials²⁴. This architecture of the aftermath has a unique

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 36.

¹⁸ Edkins, Jenny, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 2 and 117.

¹⁹ Gillis, John R. (ed.), *opus cit*, p. 268.

²⁰ Findley, Lisa, *opus cit*, p. 39.

²¹ Young, James E., *At Memory’s Edge. After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture*. Yale University Press, New Haven, 2000, p. 94.

²² Edkins, *opus cit*, p. 126.

²³ Sturken, Marita, *Tourists of History. Memory, Kitsch and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero*. Duke University Press, United States, 2007, p. 9-11.

²⁴ According to Theodor W. Adorno, it will not be possible to come to terms with the past “until the causes of what happened [the Holocaust] are no longer active. Only because these causes live on does the spell of the past remain, to this very day, unbroken”. Adorno, Theodor W., “What does



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role in the formation of a new German identity, firstly because of the physical impact on the landscape and, secondly as a consequence of the narration that is embedded in their architectural designs and collections. The first case study is Berlin, the capital city of Germany; the second one is Essen, the capital of the Ruhr area, the industrial part of Germany. Even though these cities share a few common elements, it is possible to observe important differences regarding their approach to their own pasts through the analysis and description of a few key pieces of architecture. In order to understand these differences, the theories of Walter Benjamin on recollection, redemption and barbarism will serve as the basis of this study.

Archiving Berlin's past.

Berlin, as the capital city of Germany, is not only the seat of government, but also, and more importantly, has become the “focus of its symbolic presence”, and as a consequence, it has “to promote a sense of national identity”²⁵. Accordingly, Berlin has been chosen to portray the image of redemption through its built environment since, as explained by Walter Benjamin, “the past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption”²⁶. The ultimate goal of embracing German conflictive past through its negative heritage is not only atonement, but also happiness, two images that are necessarily linked to each other²⁷. In Berlin, the landscape is carrying the heavy load of a past that is actually overwhelming the present and the future of the city by citing every single episode in the built environment. In this sense, Berlin is, using Crane’s neologism, the capital of *cite-geist*,²⁸ where memory cannot rest, where everything must be remembered. And hopefully, this process of remembering – which is almost as obsessive as Funes, the literary character created by Argentinean Jorge Luis Borges²⁹ -- will help to not only create an image of redemption but also ultimately, achieve redemption and happiness for Berlin and Germany.

coming to terms with the past mean?, pp. 114-129. In Hartman, Geoffrey H., *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1986, p. 129.

²⁵ Vale, Lawrence J., *Architecture, Power and National Identity*. Routledge, London, 1992, p. 16.

²⁶ Benjamin, Walter, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”. In *Illuminations*, introduction by Hannah Arendt, Schocken Books, New York, 1968 [1955], p. 245.

²⁷ Benjamin, Walter, *Ibid.*

²⁸ Crane, Susan, *opus cit*, p. 12.

²⁹ Borges, Jorge Luis, “Funes. His Memory”. In *Fictions*, Penguin Books, London, 2000 [1944], p. 99.



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In order to gain atonement, Germany, after a period of amnesia, has confronted its history and seems to be following Benjamin's thoughts regarding the relationship with the past:

This state of unrest refers to the demand on the researcher to abandon the tranquil contemplative attitude toward the object in order to become conscious of the critical constellation in which precisely this fragment of the past finds itself in precisely this present³⁰.

Benjamin insists in the importance of recognizing, not only relevant episodes from the past, but also, its common relation with the present. Moreover, Benjamin goes on defending historical materialism in its commitment to experiencing the past in the current times, tracing the past's pulse in the present³¹. The way to find that pulse, as Benjamin suggests, implies to "conduct [your]self like a man digging"³². Literally, this is the kind of activity that has taken place in Berlin, the Topography of Terror being an example of such a moral homage to the past in its actuality³³. The former Gestapo Headquarters, destroyed during the war and hauled away in 1949, was rediscovered in the 1980s by increasing popular interest in using the site as a "thinking place [... which would work] better than any monument to sharpen consciousness and memory"³⁴.

The Topography of Terror, the Holocaust Memorial, the Memorial for the Silent Heroes, the Neue Wache, amongst others, are examples of this idea of activating the past for the sake of both the past, and the present³⁵, with the intention of coming to terms with the past and building upon it a stronger sense of identity in the present. This exercise is also linked to the idea of barbarism explained by Walter Benjamin in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, where he stated that "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism"³⁶. In

³⁰ Benjamin, Walter, "Edward Fuchs: Collector and Historian", trans. By Knut Tarnowski. In *New German Critique*, n. 5, Spring 1975 [1937], pp. 25-75, p. 28.

³¹ Benjamin, Walter, *ibid*, p. 29.

³² Benjamin, Walter, "A Berlin Chronicle". In *Reflections*, trans. By Edmund Jephcott, ed. By Peter Demetz. Schocken Books, New York, 2007 [1978], p. 26.

³³ Steinberg, M.P., "Introduction: Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History", pp. 1-23. In Steinberg, M. P. (ed.), *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*. Cornell University Press, New York, 1996, p. 3.

³⁴ Eckhardt, Ulrich and Andreas Nachama, *Judische Orte in Berlin*. Nicolai, Berlin, 1988, p. 59. In Jordan, Jennifer A., *Structures of Memory. Understanding Urban Change in Berlin and Beyond*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2006, p. 47.

³⁵ Steinberg, M.P. (ed) *opus cit*, p. 22.

³⁶ Benjamin, Walter, "Theses on the Philosophy of History". In *Illuminations, opus cit*, p. 256.



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this sense, it is fair to say that Berlin, and other parts of Germany, have embraced the notion of barbarism as part of both their negative and positive heritage, and artefacts and memories related to conflictive episodes such as the Third Reich, are now being kept in museums for public display. An example of this attitude is the Museum of History, in Berlin.

In 1982 two projects were aiming to fulfil the need to have a museum of German history. The first one, the House of History, was designed to be built in Bonn, capital city of the FRG (Federal Republic of Germany). The second one was an initiative to house the German History in Berlin. The main problem that both projects envisaged was the so-called *Historikerstreit*, the historians' conflict: how central should the Third Reich be in those collections?³⁷ After a visit to the museum by the author (November 2009) it is possible to confirm that the space dedicated to the different periods of German History is fairly equal, aiming to avoid history as a tool of the ruling classes, questioning, as Benjamin dictated, "every victory, past and present, of the rulers"³⁸. By doing so, the collection shows what Michael Rothberg has coined as a "multidirectional memory", an open minded point of view which aims to acknowledge all the "conflictive claims that constitute the archives of memory and the terrain of politics"³⁹. Even though this museum aims to give a broad spectrum of German History, including episodes that in other countries would have been erased (such as in the Musée Memorial pour la Paix of Caen⁴⁰) it is possible to agree with Benjamin when he recognizes that public museums are based on the showcasing of masterpieces, and by doing so, these institutions can only offer "fragmentary notions of the culture of the past"⁴¹. It is then the role of the visitor to reflect on the collections and gather his/her own conclusions.

The Neues Museum in Museum Island, Berlin, offers an interesting solution to the traces left by the past. On the one hand, there is a clear intention to recover the museum originally built by August Stüler in 1840, transformed in the 1920s and

³⁷ Maier, Charles S., *The Unmasterable Past. History, Holocaust, and German National Identity*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1997 [1988], p. 123 and 126.

³⁸ Benjamin, Walter, "Theses on the Philosophy of History". In *Illuminations*, *opus cit*, p. 255.

³⁹ Rothberg, Michael, *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford University Press, California, 2009, p. 29.

⁴⁰ Brower, Benjamin C., "The Preserving Machine. The "New" Museum and Working through Trauma – the Musée Memorial pour la Paix of Caen". In *History & Memory*, Volume 11, Number 1, Spring/Summer 1999, pp. 77-103.

⁴¹ Benjamin, Walter, "Edward Fuchs: Collector and Historian", *opus cit*, p. 55.



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heavily damaged during World War II; on the other hand, David Chipperfield introduction of new structures as a dialogue between different episodes in architectural history: the past and the present. As Joseph Rikwert put it,

The reborn building now speaks anew to the visitor in accents that echo the intentions of its original designers and assumes the role of a witness to its own tragic story. [...] The effect is that of a palimpsest, a surface on which any number of texts have been written but only imperfectly erased, so that it becomes possible for us to trace earlier fragments under existing lines⁴².

This description of the Neues Museum could easily be applied to Berlin, as an urban complex in which it is possible to read different layers, meanings, episodes, stories. The Reichstag, renovated by Sir Norman Foster, offers a new layer of meanings for another conflictive building. The Reichstag is now the image of “democratic transparency” but it also is a reminder of the imperial past, the destruction carried out by the Nazis in the 1930s, the graffiti left by Soviet soldiers during the War, the wrapping of the building by Christo in 1995, and ultimately, the site of the Bundestag⁴³. Other buildings in Berlin, in contrast, are aiming to gain redemption by telling stories that can still be read in the built environment, traces that have not been erased. An example of this tendency would be the Workshop for the Blind, Museum Otto Weidt, which tells the story of a “silent hero” who tried to help Jewish workers in his factory during the Nazi period. The main interest of this small museum is the power of its authenticity – nothing has changed in the building since it was closed during the war⁴⁴.

Berlin is also covered with traces of its “negative heritage”: from the bullet holes on the facades of many buildings, to the multiple memorials built ex-profeso all over the city. Some of them as subtle as the Bebel Platz memorial, which commemorates the site of the 10th May 1933 Nazi book burning. This monument, designed by Micha Ullman in 1995, is an underground empty bookshelf, which can be

⁴² Rikwert, Joseph, “The Museum rejuvenated”, pp. 25-35. In *Neues Museum Berlin*. David Chipperfield Architects in collaboration with Julian Harrap. Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Germany, 2009, p. 35 and 52.

⁴³ Huyssen, Andreas, Present pasts. Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory. Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2003, pp. 76-77.

⁴⁴ Jordan, Jeniffer A., *Structures of Memory. Understanding Urban Change in Berlin and Beyond*. Stanford University press, Stanford, 2006, p. 14.



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seen through a glass panel. Other memorials, however, have a much more intrusive impact on the urban palimpsest. That would be the case of the Holocaust Memorial, designed by Peter Eisenman, 2005. This project was surrounded in controversy since the competition in 1995 until today. The site (the city centre), the shape of it (similar to a graveyard), the size of it (19,000 sq meters), all contributed to the controversy, as it has been explained in detail by James Young, who was part of the Commission for the Memorial. Young understood that German nationals had to embrace their past, instead of being paralyzed by it. He believed that

[...] in their memorial visits [living Germans] will be asked to recall the mass murder of a people once perpetrated in their name, the absolute void this destruction has left behind, and their own responsibility for memory itself⁴⁵.

Berlin's emphasis in unlocking the past, in reading it through a critical perspective identifying barbarism in its history, seems to follow Benjamin's ideas on the past and its permanence in the present. By doing so, Berlin offers the opportunity for

[...] rescuing the subversive and critical forms of culture, those viscerally opposed to the bourgeois ideology, from being embalmed, neutralized, academicized, and enshrined by the cultural establishment⁴⁶.

Even though the built environment embodies the traces of barbarian episodes in history, it can also become a prompt to critically reconsider our past, and from that confrontation with unpleasant memories, it would be possible to build a stronger sense of identity and belonging to the place. As explained earlier on, this seems to be the case in Berlin as a consequence of being the capital city of Germany. In Essen, the capital city of the Ruhr Valley, the built environment is used in a completely different fashion, as an excuse to select within the past, only positive memories in order to transform the built environment and the regional identity.

Retaining the Ruhr's present. Essen for the Ruhr 2010

⁴⁵ Young, James E., *opus cit*, p. 223.

⁴⁶ Lowy, Michael, "Against the grain: The dialectical conception of culture in Walter Benjamin's Theses of 1940", pp. 206-213. In Steinberg, M.P. *opus cit*, p. 211.



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Essen has been awarded the title of European Capital of Culture 2010 under the motto “Essen for the Ruhr”. As a consequence, Essen became also the representative of the Ruhr Area (German: ‘Ruhrgebiet’ or simply ‘Das Revier’), an urban conurbation of fifty three cities and towns, acting on behalf of all of them. In this sense, the Ruhr Metropolis is the biggest conurbation in Germany, and the third one of its kind in Europe, containing 5.300.000 people within its borders⁴⁷. The western part of Germany which developed around the rivers Ruhr, Emscher and Rhine became an essential focus for the industrialisation process at the beginning of the twentieth century, as a consequence of its soil rich in coal, a region where it was so easy to obtain the “black gold”⁴⁸. Coal and steel were essential in the development of this area as the industrial centre of Germany, a process accelerated by the Kaiser’s armament policy before the First World War and later on by Hitler and his rearmament interest after the Great War⁴⁹. Germany had two other similar industrial areas based on coal mining, the Saar area and Upper Silesia (now Poland), but the ‘Ruhrgebiet’ was by far the largest of the three.

During the 1960s most of the coal mines were closed down, leaving many monumental traces of a richer and busier past, alongside a deep social and economical crisis, with very high unemployment. From the 1980s some of the industrial relics were put to new uses: museums, cultural centres, exhibition halls or places of recreation, such as the Zollverein Pit (Museum of the Ruhr), the Duisburg Landscape Park and the Gasometer in Oberhausen⁵⁰. It was thanks to the International Building Exhibition (IBA) in 1999, that the Ruhr area benefited from a wider regeneration project around the river Emscher, which not only recovered the banks of the river back to nature, but also the old industrial heritage to hold new meanings and uses⁵¹.

Culture had been present in the Ruhr Area in the form of museums since the early twentieth century. Alfred Salmony, a German art historian, wrote an article in

⁴⁷ Essen for the Ruhr. European Capital of Culture, 2008. *Essen for the Ruhr. Book 1. Essen for the Ruhr*, Bochum, 2010, p. 12.

⁴⁸ Junkermann, Susanne, *Metropole Ruhr. Kulturhauptstadt Europas*. Ziethen – Panorama Verlag, Germany, 2009, p. 4.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Prosek, Achim, 2006. ‘Culture through transformation – transformation through culture. Industrial heritage in the Ruhr region – the example of the Zeche Zollverein’, in Dieter Hassenplug, Burkhardt Kolbmüller and Sebastian Schroeder-Esch, *Heritage and Media in Europe- contributing towards integration and regional development* (Weimar: Institute für Europäische Urbanistik, Bauhaus-Universität Weimar), pp. 239-248, p. 239.

⁵¹ Essen for the Ruhr European Capital of Culture 2010, *opus cit*, p. 12.



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1929 entitled “The Rhineland as an artistic unit”, highlighting not only the industrial landscape of the region, but also the large number of museums and cultural institutions supported by the municipalities⁵². Despite this positive approach to the cultural background of the region, it is difficult to assess the real impact that these institutions had on the population at the time.

One of the most relevant museums of the early twentieth century was the Museum Folkwang, founded in Hagen in 1902 by Karl Ernst Osthaus, a philanthropic young man born into a rich family, who inherited a great sum of money when he was only 22 years old, and used his fortune “to make beauty once again the dominant force in life” by creating museums and supporting art and its creators⁵³. Despite all his efforts to transform Hagen into a beautiful and artistic city, overshadowing its industrial condition, when he died in 1921 the Folkwang Museum – his masterpiece – was sold to the City of Essen⁵⁴. This event has been interpreted as the incapacity of the people of Hagen to understand the value of Osthaus’ ideals⁵⁵. However, in the last few decades much effort has been invested into recovering part of the glory that Osthaus brought to Hagen, even though his most important legacy is not kept in its original structure, but in Essen⁵⁶. The former Folkwang museum in Hagen has been recovered recently and houses a new museum. More importantly, Osthaus’ original collection and his spirit have been renewed thanks to the project Essen for the Ruhr, European Capital of Culture 2010, since its motto is: *Transformation Through Culture – Culture Through Transformation*.

The IBA in 1999 and the project ‘Essen for the Ruhr’ have become the stepping stones for a deep transformation in the Ruhr area: from an industrial past to a cultural present. Industrial monuments have the material form of reconciliation with the past; a past to be proud of; a past that is bringing tourism and regeneration to the Ruhr; a past that, ultimately, is constructing a new regional identity⁵⁷. And the Folkwang Museum is playing an essential role alongside the Zollverein Pit (Museum

⁵² Salmony, Alfred, 1929. ‘The Rhineland as an Artistic Unit’, *Parnassus*, vol. 1, n.4, pp. 12-13, p. 12

⁵³ Schulte, Birgit, ‘Karl Ernst Osthaus, Folkwang and the ‘Hegener Impuls’. Transcending the walls of the museum’, pp. 213-220. In *Journal of the History of Collections*, vol. 21, n. 2, 2009, p. 213.

⁵⁴ Schulte, *ibid*, p. 218.

⁵⁵ Fehr, Michael, *Text and context: developing a museum by reflecting its history*, Lecture given to the Hereford Salon, London, 16th May 1996, URL: <http://www.aesthetischepraxis.de/Texte2/TEXTCON.pdf>, accessed on 11/05/2010

⁵⁶ Fehr, *ibid*.

⁵⁷ Prosek, Achim, *opus cit*, p. 246.



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of the Ruhr), the Duisburg Landscape Park and the Gasometer in Oberhausen. They all talk about the industrial past in a renewed/ reconstructed cultural way.

The Folkwang Museum was acquired by the city of Essen in 1922. It was housed in the building of the Essen Museum which during the Second World War was completely destroyed. Since then the collection has been exhibited on the same site, but in different buildings and extensions, until the most recent one, by the London architect David Chipperfield, opened in 2010. A competition was launched in 2006 and the first prize was won by Chipperfield, star architect who has worked in Germany in the last few years with great success – he won the Stirling Prize for the Museum of Literature, Marbach am Neckar, 2002-2006; followed by his masterpiece, the Neues Museum in Berlin, opened in 2009⁵⁸.

Chipperfield's project is based on the pre-existing 1960s structure. As stated by Chipperfield himself, apart from the new material used in the façade (recycled glass), the rest of the building aims for a complete integration with the old museum⁵⁹. Some critics have argued that Chipperfield's project is not the best of his works: it is appropriate and works so well with the old building that sometimes it is difficult to realise if you are in the original building, or in the extension. That is the reason why, after his great project on the Neues Museum Berlin (which has been analysed earlier on), the extension for the Folkwang museum seems to be 'too safe'⁶⁰. But that was the project that the client, the Krupp Foundation, was looking for: an extension that would embrace the past instead of overshadowing it: the idea was to renew the past, but be selective about it. The episode that was chosen to be renewed was not that of the industrial heritage and the coal mines, but that of the first European museum of Modern Art.

It is in this context in which it is possible to draw connections with Walter Benjamin's theories: in this case, the past is not an opportunity for atonement, but an excuse "to renew the old world"⁶¹, which is, according to Benjamin, "the collector's

⁵⁸ Woodman, Ellis, 'David Chipperfield's Museum Folkwang in Essen, Germany', *bdonline*, 19/02/10,

<http://www.bdonline.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=3158321>, accessed on 12/05/2010.

⁵⁹ Chipperfield, David, *Museum Folkwang*, Press Conference, 27/01/2010. URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OUAfhYQM-yE>, accessed on the 11/05/2010.

⁶⁰ Woodman, *opus cit.*

⁶¹ Benjamin, Walter, "Unpacking my library", pp. 61-69. In *Illuminations*, *opus cit.*, p. 63.



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deepest desire when he is driven to acquire new things”⁶². By hiring star architects and updating former mine pits of factories, the Ruhr area is renewing its old world, giving new meanings to the built environment. A similar exercise has been performed in the Zollverein Museum, in Essen and the Duisburg Museum Kuppersmuhle of Modern Art. The latter one used to be a warehouse at the beginning of the twentieth century, and was converted into a museum in 1999 by Herzog and de Meuron architects. Hoping to regenerate the urban area around the Duisburg’s inland harbour as part of a masterplan designed by Sir Norman Foster, this development was also included in the IBA’s project of 1989-1990⁶³. It seems as if the Kuppersmuhle Museum wanted to recreate the success of the Tate Modern in London, a project by the same architects in a similar structure. In 2008 a new extension to the museum was approved for the same architects, just as it had happened in the Tate Modern.

The Zollverein Museum, Essen, is another example of the interest in regenerating the Ruhr area through architecture. In this case, the shell of a former mine pit has been updated in order to house the collection of the Ruhr museum. The architects chosen for this project were Sir Norman Foster in 1997 and Rem Koolhaas in 2001. As explained by the initiative “Essen for the Ruhr”:

New aesthetic buildings are beginning to impose themselves on places where the industrial past has left its ruthless scars. Internationally famous architects, like Norman Foster, Rem Koolhaas, David Chipperfield, Herzog and de Meuron, and Ortner & Ortner – to name but a few – are some of the many architectural protagonists behind this “art of transformation”⁶⁴.

The Museum Folkwang, however, resists the impact of this culture of spectacle, and even though he is one of the star architects afore mentioned, Chipperfield have avoided an “alien intrusion” in Essen’s urban context, detaching himself from the so called ‘Bilbao effect’ in order to create an architecture that lasts, “that resists the culture of spectacle”⁶⁵. In this sense, Chipperfield and his extension to

⁶² Benjamin, *ibid*, p. 63.

⁶³ Museum Kuppersmuhle, “Architecture”. In <http://www.museum-kueppersmuehle.de/index.php?id=14&L=1>, accessed on 18th July 2010.

⁶⁴ Essen for the Ruhr, *opus cit*, p. 14.

⁶⁵ Sudjic, Deyan, “Exhibiting Architecture”, pp. 5-7. In Chipperfield, David, *David Chipperfield Architects. Form Matters. Catalogue of the Exhibition at the Design Museum, London, 21/10/2009-31/01/2010*. Verlag, Cologne, 2010, p. 6.



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the Museum Folkwang seems to be answering the question posed by Gevork Hartoonian: “How should one appropriate Benjamin’s ideas on ‘construction’ in the present situation when mediatic images have drawn architects’ attention to the surface?”⁶⁶ Chipperfield has created a bridge between the past and the present: he designed a silent extension to a museum full of memories and pride. The Folkwang Museum recalls an important episode in the Ruhr area’s history, renewing it for its consumption in the present.

The Museum Folkwang, together with the project ‘Essen for the Ruhr’ and the industrial heritage can be read as one unit, as a monument to the past, a memorial hoping for younger generations to learn about the origin of their identity, and older generations coming to terms with a past that gave them an opportunity to work, and then put them in the difficult situation of unemployment. As a common project these initiatives appear to answer the difficult question asked by Halbwachs in 1941: ‘Where can (the present) find the necessary impetus to free itself from the past? And in what direction can it reconstruct itself?’ (1992 [1941] 187). The Ruhr region is using the past to reconstruct its identity, without necessarily completely erasing the memories attached to its industrial heritage. By doing so, there is a clear interest in avoiding nostalgia – as a longing for a home that no longer exists⁶⁷. Moreover, the opportunities opened by the IBA and the European Capital of Culture have demonstrated that memory is not static, that it can actually be shaped, preserved and/or erased (Crane 2000, 1).

Conclusions

Throughout this paper redemption, barbaric episodes, renewal of hidden meanings are the main ideas borrowed from Benjamin in order to understand the process of archiving the past in Berlin and retaining the Ruhr’s present. Two urban contexts in the same country, Berlin and the Ruhr Valley, have chosen very different options when dealing with their heritage. On the one hand, Berlin, as the capital city, has chosen to portray the image of redemption, the image of a city overwhelmed by its past. Berlin’s history is showcased in every corner without being selective.

⁶⁶ Hartoonian, Gevork , “Looking backward, looking forward. Delightful delays”, pp. 23-38. In Hartoonian, Gevork (ed.), *Walter Benjamin and Architecture*. Routledge, New York and Oxon, 2010, p. 24.

⁶⁷ Boym, Sveflana, *The Future of Nostalgia*. Basic Books, New York, 2001, p. XIII.



Positive and negative heritage are represented at the same level in the different layers of the city. The barbarian episodes of its past are forever present in the urban palimpsest: they are necessary in order to gain redemption, and ultimately, happiness, as Benjamin thought.

On the other hand, the Ruhr area represents hope based on a fresh start: selecting from the past industrial heritage, the accent is on the buildings as shells in order to house new uses. Redemption and negative heritage are avoided in the construction of the new regional identity for the Ruhr. The construction of a new and stronger identity was the main goal of both the IBA 1989-1990 and the Essen for the Ruhr through its built environment. In order to reach this result, certain episodes from the past had to be concealed, and by doing so, “what is allowed to be forgotten provides living space for present projects”⁶⁸. ‘Culture through transformation – transformation through culture’ has been the motto behind both projects in 1990 and 2010: renewing, changing, updating the heritage, reusing the old bringing new meanings to the fore. However, it is important to remember that, even though this region aims to transform its economy towards the services, the industrial heritage still remains as a fundamental role in the shaping of the regional identity⁶⁹. Moreover, the deindustrialisation of the region has brought along many social and economic problems which cannot be solved by being proud of the region – pride does not bring new jobs, even though it can help in the construction of a new identity⁷⁰.

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⁶⁸ Connerton, Paul, “Seven types of forgetting”, pp. 59-71. In *Memory Studies*, 2008, 1, 59, p.

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⁶⁹ Schroder, Sebastian, “Culture through transformation – transformation through culture. Industrial Heritage in the Ruhr region – the example of the Zeche Zollverein”, pp. 239-248. In Hassenpflug, Dieter, Burkhardt Kolbmüller and Sebastian Schroder-Esch (ed.), *Hermes vol. 3. Heritage and Media*. Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, Institute für Europäische Urbanistik, 2006, p. 240. in Europe – contributing toward integration and regional development

⁷⁰ Schroder, Sebastian, *ibid.*, p. 243.



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