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Re-mapping the Field: New Approaches in Conflict Archaeology



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Commemorating the uncomfortable: The Berlin Wall

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Though the Cold War itself is a comparatively recent historical event, it cannot be too early to deal with a heritage that is already fast disappearing. The physical remains of the Cold War in Europe have been targets of mass demolition since the fall and rapid dismantling of the Berlin Wall. After the fall of the Wall in 1989 the conservation community gradually became aware of a Cold War heritage that would be lost without timely action (US Department of Defence 1994, 40). With a few exceptions, such as those promoted and carried out by English Heritage (Cocroft and Thomas 2003; Cocroft 2001), conservation of the Cold War's legacy generally lags in Europe. On the other hand, evidence of scattered Cold War heritage related projects already underway or in the planning stages can be discerned here and there, though often in dire need of funding or support.

This paper will deal with one of the best known structures of the 20th century, which also was and is an icon of the Cold War: the Berlin Wall. This paper will focus on the documentation of the physical remnants and traces of the Berlin Wall (carried out by the Department for Conservation of the University of Cottbus between 2001 and 2003) as well as on the problems arising from the attempt to protect the scattered remains of this example of uncomfortable heritage (Huse 1997).

Although, or perhaps because, most of it has vanished, the Wall is, amongst many other things, not only a tourist attraction, but also the symbol of a political system that was overcome by a peaceful revolution. In

addition, it has acquired international significance as a symbol of the Cold War, although - in retrospect - this role requires some qualification. It is true that the Berlin Wall was built during the Cold War era, and its construction would of course not have been possible without the background of the conflict between the superpowers. But it was not an inevitable product of the Cold War. Today we know that the Wall was invented and erected on the initiative of the GDR chiefs Walter Ulbricht and Erich Honecker, who had to struggle for many years to gain the Soviet leadership's permission to do so (See Harrison 2003).

Documenting the physical remnants of the Berlin Wall

The Wall is generally believed to have disappeared almost completely. It is certainly true that huge efforts were made, mostly in 1990 and 1991, to dismantle and eradicate all of the border fortifications encircling West Berlin; a vast structure 155 kilometres in length. Whilst the emotional need of Berliners to eliminate the Wall is understandable, people might have sensed even then that this action was somewhat exaggerated in its thoroughness. Indeed there were warning voices as a few people were convinced that one could not simply remove this Wall which had shaped the lives of many people so painfully and for such a long time and pretend nothing had happened (Deutsches Nationalkomitee 1997: 93-100; Dolff-Bonekämper 1999: 317-325; Feversham and Schmidt 1999).



1 The death-strip. Photo taken by the borderguards, November 1988.

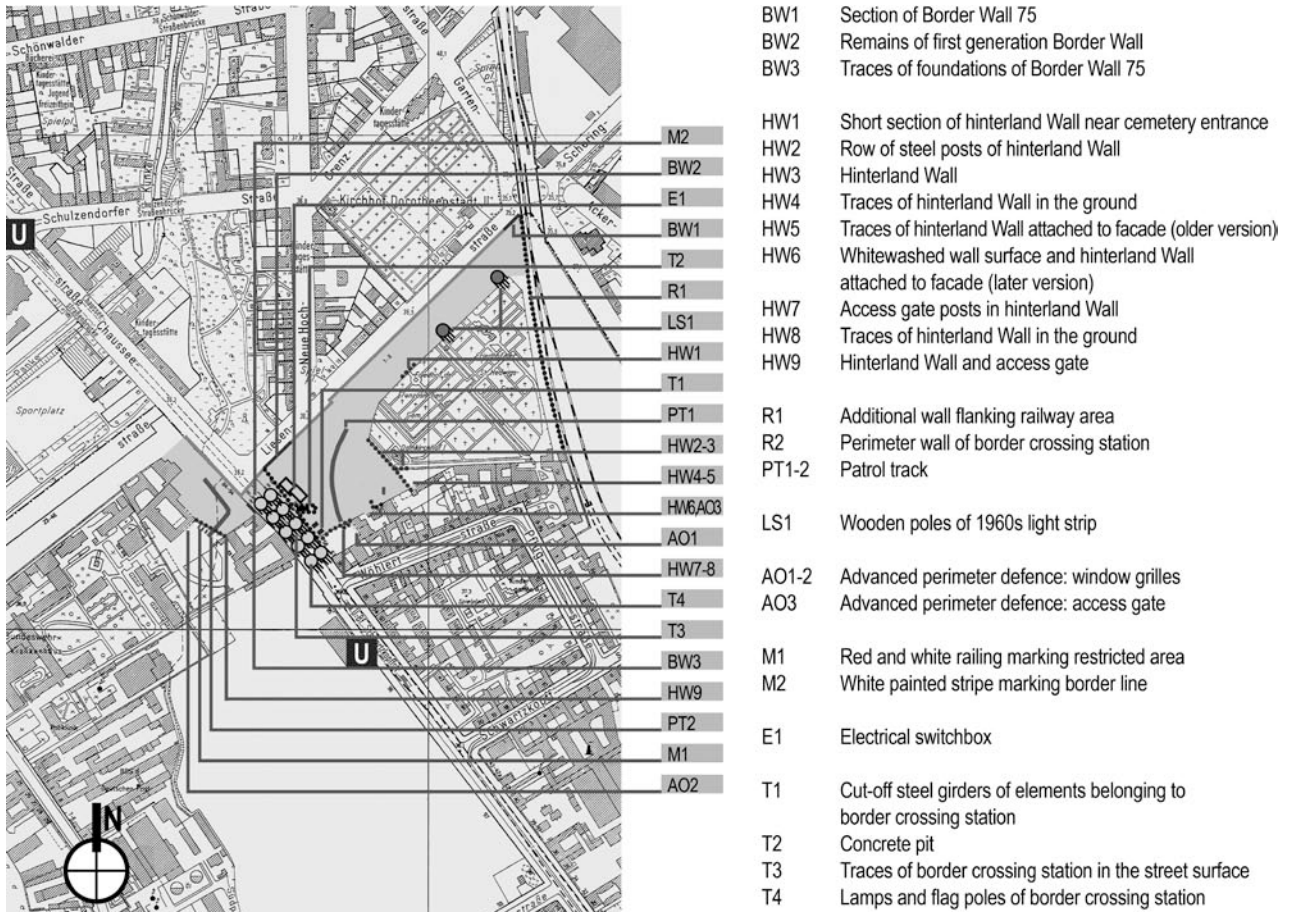
Today there is a scar that runs right through Berlin's urban fabric from north to south: a landscape of memory full of remnants and traces of the former border fortifications. A decade after the fall of the Wall, Berlin politicians at last showed signs of a new awareness, signs of interest in seeing the extant remains of the Berlin border documented and, as far as possible, preserved from further destruction. Therefore, in 2001, the Senate Department for Urban Development and Berlin's Conservation Authority recognised the need for a full investigation and documentation of the existing remains. This work was subsequently produced by the authors. It has been published as a comprehensive guide, both in German and English (Klausmeier and Schmidt 2004), and is also available on the internet (www.stadtentwicklung.berlin.de/denkmal/) (Figure 2).

It should be made clear that the structure simplistically known as the Berlin Wall was never a static one: between 13 August 1961 and 9 November 1989 the border defences were continually enhanced, extended and modified, and obsolete elements were replaced. The quasi-archaeological survey has revealed structures and elements belonging to different phases of the Wall, not only of the version that stood in 1989. All these structures, these remnants are documented as fully as

possible - 'remnants' meaning those physical witnesses which once were part of the border defences. In most cases these are objects that were created especially for the border: walls, towers, patrol roads, light masts, fences, obstacles of all kinds and border markings. Quite frequently, older structures such as walls and pathways were integrated into the border obstacles; thus they too, became 'remnants' of the border.

In addition, the existence of an impregnable border right through Berlin produced countless secondary structures. Many of these 'traces' of the Wall - meaning all those visible signs which were not part of the border itself but which would not have come into being without the border's existence - have been included in the documentation, but without any attempt at completeness.

Whilst the 'Berlin Wall' should be perceived as a single monument, it expresses itself however in an infinite number and variety of fragments and particles distributed over an extended area. The documentation is therefore primarily an archaeological survey covering the full extent of the border strip and the restricted zone on its eastern side and listing all recognisably relevant situations in this area. The area has been divided into



2 Map with remnants and traces of the Wall inscribed. Taken from Klausmeier, A., and Schmidt, L., 2004.

sections of reasonable size and the findings were evaluated and interpreted on the basis of precise maps, air photographs and historical photographs, particularly those taken from border guard files (Figure 2).

Many of these remains do not conform to the common picture of the Berlin Wall, because those elements, which anyone could identify with the border – such as the Border Wall turned towards the West and the observation towers – were demolished with particular thoroughness. What remained to far greater extent and in remarkable variety were those components that had never been noticed by especially the (Western) public. The border fortifications were effective and indeed insurmountable only for the citizens of the East. For them, the concrete edifice perceived by the West as 'The Wall' was just the last element in a deep sequence of obstacles. Those who actually managed to advance from the East to the West had to negotiate sign-posted restricted areas patrolled by police and state security officers, followed by various perimeter defences and the hinterland Wall, before they found themselves in the death-strip of the border fortifications proper; a death-strip patrolled by the soldiers of the Border Command who, all too often, followed the general orders to shoot to kill rather than let anybody commit the heinous crime of 'flight from the Republic' (Figure 3).

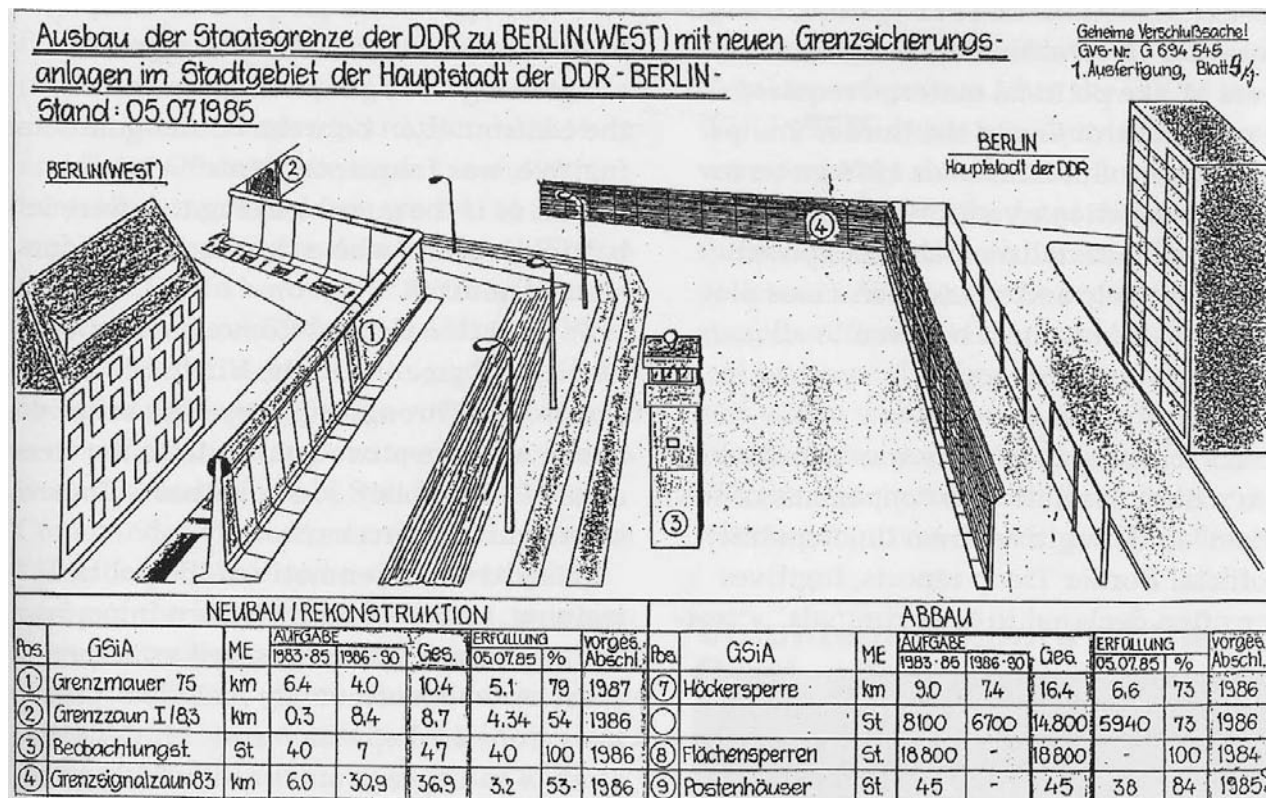
What all the remnants impressively bear witness to, is the existence of the border itself - the fact that a border

was defined around West Berlin and right through the fabric of a city of three and a half million inhabitants, and was upheld for twenty-eight years whatever the expense both in material and manpower; a border which was so unique in so many ways that future generations might find it difficult to believe its existence if the physical evidence does not remain.

Extant remains

The universal view of the Berlin Wall is largely identical with the view from the West – the side 'facing the enemy' as the Border Guard files put it. The 'Forward Blocking Element', the Border Wall immediately at the sector border, has always been regarded as 'The Wall' proper and has attracted most of the general public's attention. This role is underlined by the fact that only Border Wall elements have been sold around the world and that the 'Wallpeckers' hacked their fragments from this element only, and also by the fact that the demolition of the border defences concentrated on this element. Today, sections of this fourth generation Border Wall survive only in three locations, but quasi-archaeological remains of older Border Wall generations can be found in several locations.

The potential fugitives from the Republic approached it from the other side, however, the so-called 'friendly' side: this face, therefore, may be seen as its real front. The restricted area immediately to the East of the border fortification was indicated by red-and-white con-



3 Scheme of the Border from 1985, Taken from Border Guard Files.



4 Part of the Hinterlandwall, near Bernauer Strasse, 2005

crete pillars and by a low railing also painted in red and white. Many additional, diverse installations which one might call 'perimeter defences' can still be identified: concrete walls, fences and various obstacles (such as the heavy square concrete tubs known as 'flower bowl barricades'); there were also metal grids barring windows close to the border strip, various spiky obstacles to prevent people from scaling fences and walls, and additional light installations illuminating any possible hiding places in the vicinity of the hinterland Wall.

Much of the remaining hinterland Wall still bears its original paintwork of white oblongs framed in grey: an indication to any careless strollers that this was no ordinary wall. The hinterland Wall's face towards the death strip was whitewashed to render the detection of fugitives easier even at night. Quite frequently older structures, such as the featureless side walls of houses laid bare by the demolition of neighbouring buildings which had stood too close to the border, became part of the hinterland Wall and were whitewashed accordingly. The hinterland Wall remnants assume many guises (sometimes longer concrete walls retaining the remains of access gates, sometimes just a row of cut-off metal posts in the ground, or a fragment attached to a house, or a concrete trace in the ground) but they always serve to indicate the extent of the death strip towards the East (Figure 4 and 6).

Watchtowers were probably the most conspicuous elements within the death strip. There were just over three hundred all around West Berlin in 1989 of which only three remain in situ today, but we have also identified a fair number of what we call 'footprints' of former towers. The concrete patrol road which is preserved in many long sections was the logistic lifeline of the border troops on duty, not only as the path along which any patrolling soldiers walked up and down, but also as the road for any vehicles transporting soldiers to and from their posts. The masts of the light strip flanked the patrol road. The floodlights encircled West Berlin completely;



5 Part of the border fortifications in the River Spree, 2005

at night they bathed the death strip in brilliant light. In some places the lamps of the former light strip have been converted into ordinary streetlights.

The Western side of the patrol road also featured colour markings, usually applied to the light posts. Horizontal bars coloured red-white-green-white marked the 'patrol limit'. Border guards were not allowed to overstep this line unannounced as this would have been interpreted as an escape attempt and their colleagues would have had to open fire. This highlights that even the soldiers of Border Command who guarded the Wall and who had orders to 'annihilate' every adversary were regarded as potential border violators themselves by their superiors.

The various Border Crossing Stations represented a special situation in the border. Subjected to severe security measures, they allowed passage for authorised pedestrians, cars and rail travellers respectively; on the waterways there were also Crossing Stations for freightships. The complex patterns that governed the border traffic have left many traces in the shape of road markings, light masts, flag poles, gates and control huts.

Cultural significance

Around the globe, the Berlin Wall is probably better known than many of the places inscribed on UNESCO's list of World Heritage sites, not least because of its sudden fall. But however immense the global interest, Berliners themselves have long attempted to forget the instrument of division and separation. On its own, the fact that the Wall is well-known and of great interest to tourists may not be enough to prove its outstanding cultural significance. Indeed for many people it signifies the exact opposite to the values one usually expects of great cultural monuments. But architectural sites and places of cultural significance are primarily preserved for their historical values, and the Wall is an object which is unique in human history: of all those many walls which were built over the millennia only this 'protec-



6 Remains of the Hinterlandwall, near Wollankstrasse, 2004

tion rampart' divided people of the same culture, language and descent. However, the fortification in Berlin was not directed against potential intruders but against the builders' own citizens. Flight from a state in which they could or would not go on living was the last resort for far more than two million East Germans during the 1950s; by closing the border the Communist Party made it clear to everybody that it was all-powerful and that the citizens of the GDR had no choice but to accept the situation. None of the other border fortifications in human history, not the Great Wall of China, or the Roman Limes, or even today's border fortifications in Palestine or between the USA and Mexico, follows the perverse logic that produced the border in Berlin.

Perhaps no other place condenses the history of the twentieth century as this one does. A product of the transformations following World War II, for twenty-eight years the Berlin Wall was the one spot on the globe where the two superpowers were in daily contact and often conflict; the focus of the Cold War which might well have flared up into a hot one at times. The fall of the Wall on 9 November 1989 caused world-wide sympathy and delight and was perceived as a signal event leading to further radical changes in the Eastern block and to the reordering of Europe.

The fact that the Wall, which – in the words of the GDR's leader, Erich Honecker – was to remain standing for another hundred years, could fall so suddenly and unexpectedly may well be the most impressive message which this object conveys. Within this context the fragmentary state of the border fortifications is just as much part of its message as the ruinous state is the obvious proof of the fact that the Wall has indeed been overcome. Because it was overcome peacefully and unexpectedly, the Berlin Wall is perceived today, internationally at least, primarily as a positively charged site – particularly so in countries such as Korea, in which the emotional consequences of national division are still



7 The emptiness left behind by the removal of border elements, near Wollankstrasse, 2004

felt by many people. In Berlin and Germany, however, the public awareness of any positive values connected to the Wall is only slowly rising since many people have – understandably – not forgotten the grief of separation and division.

Although its grosser manifestations have disappeared, the Wall left its stamp both on the fabric of the city *and* on the minds of its inhabitants. The removal of walls, towers and fences created an often disturbing and confusing emptiness: a shadow monument present in the minds and memories of people not only in Berlin, but all over the world (Figure 7).

The Wall's remnants and traces may appear banal, tawdry and neglected, but they are indispensable as witnesses of a historically unique situation. The remnants are, however, gradually and continuously disappearing, but the plea for the preservation and mediation of an uncomfortable monument like the Wall has been and still is difficult. Strong controversies accompany all the discussions about the monument status of the Wall even today. There is still a great demand for mediating its history and cultural significance, but it became obvious during our work that a conservation-led approach to the Wall should be from a wider perspective, perceiving and interpreting the Berlin Wall as a border landscape in the sense of an historical and cultural landscape. Hence the isolated and sporadically preserved Wall remnants, which are listed and protected as crystallisation points, as immediately obvious places of memory of the Wall, conspicuously bear witness as monuments of the division of Berlin, Germany, Europe and the world.

After many years of neglect and indecision on the part of the Berlin authorities, the remnants of the Wall and the proper way of commemorating this structure in the city became the focus of discussion through an extraordinary installation created by the owner of the



8 Alexandra Hildebrandt's Border installation, summer 2004

Checkpoint Charlie Museum, Alexandra Hildebrandt, in 2004. Presented as a temporary structure (since permission to erect a permanent one would not have been forthcoming), the installation could be described as the resurrection of a 140-meter strip of Berlin Wall, combined with 1065 wooden crosses to commemorate the victims of the borders through Berlin and through Germany. Though employing authentic Border Wall elements, and thus creating the impression of being an authentic remnant of the border, the new Wall was erected about ten metres away from the original border line. Unlike the authentic Wall, which had been boldly erected along a busy street, making it unpassable, the pseudo-Wall tamely filled an unused plot, conveying the impression that the whole border-system had respected existing city structures such as streets and neighbouring houses (Figure 8).

All-too obviously, Hildebrandt's memorial was a publicity event designed to focus even more attention on the Museum, already commercially the most successful exhibition in Berlin, drawing roughly one million people per year and charging them ten Euros each for viewing some dusty exhibits installed during the Cold War to battle against the "Wall of Shame". When Hildebrandt refused to remove the installation after the temporary permission had run out, the state of Berlin had it demolished by a court order.

The embarrassing fake Wall at Checkpoint Charlie did have one positive effect: it made it abundantly clear that the city politicians and authorities had neglected the topic for too long, allowing commercial interests to occupy the ensuing vacuum, and that there was a dire need for a responsible concept addressing the issue of the Wall. To achieve this goal within the foreseeable future, a board of experts was formed by the Senator of Culture in the autumn of 2004. The results of its deliberations was presented to the public in April 2005. One of the aims of the new concept is to highlight, within

the city, various places that possess outstanding significance in the context of the Wall, such as the Checkpoint Charlie area and the situation at the Brandenburg Gate. The main accent, however, will be on Bernauer Strasse (where the Berlin Wall Documentation Centre already exists, drawing ever more visitors from one year to the next) and the adjoining area of former Nordbahnhof. The reshaping of this 'landscape of memory', incorporating the existing Wall Memorial as well as the Chapel of the Reconciliation, will be the subject of an architectural competition to be held later in 2006.

In the case of a chapter of history as bizarre as the history of the Berlin Wall, tangible evidence is of particular necessity lest people, a few generations hence, simply refuse to credit its existence. The Berlin Wall stood for 28 years, creating an artificial division within a city of three million inhabitants, and it became an icon of the Cold War, but already, just sixteen years after its fall, a new generation is finding it difficult to believe this structure ever existed. This underlines the need both for the preservation of its scattered and fragmentary material remnants and traces and for their presentation and interpretation for a wider public, for Berliners as well as for visitors from abroad.

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Conflict archaeology has come a long way since its early days, when field archaeologists followed lines of defences – along rivers and coastlines - and simply recorded what they found. Now the approach is more systematic, more considered, and often cross-disciplinary in scope. Furthermore the context in which we undertake this work is now more professional, and more rigorous. Interest now extends beyond the mere existence of defence installations to their landscape context, an appreciation of their setting, the character of the area influenced by their presence, and crucially their meaning in geographic, political and social terms. We also know much more now about the critical use of documentary sources and oral history and the contribution each can make to conflict archaeology. Against this background and with the benefits and added value of increasingly cross-disciplinary teams, we seemingly have the greater confidence now to encounter problematic and challenging situations, such as Northern Ireland and the West Bank. The complexity of questions and issues raised at these sites of conflict require more reflexive, more integrated and more thoughtful approaches therefore, and it is examples of these approaches that are presented here – re-mapping a field where archaeologists and others now increasingly find themselves.



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