

The Berlin Walk

▼ Photo by Julia Jamrozik.

One October 3rd, while Germany celebrated the anniversary of its reunification, Julia and I set out for a walk. We began in Baumschulenweg, a peculiar part of Berlin where the pastoral, suburban, and urban rub shoulders in a collection of lawns, big-box stores, apartments, and *kleingartenkolonien* — clusters of tiny cottages built in allotment gardens on marginal lands all over the city (legally these were only tool sheds, but a skyline of satellite dishes suggested otherwise). It was hard to imagine *it* here. Had it really run alongside these modest country retreats, dwarfing their little wooden fences?

Only 15 years had passed since *it* divided this neighborhood, but there was no evidence of the separation. Eventually we found the trace we were looking for: a thin stripe just two cobblestones wide running through the grass, across the sidewalk, and off into the distance. Difficult to believe these ordinary stones laid end to end were all that commemorated a structure of such significance, a decidedly underwhelming scar to signify 28 years of division. We set off in pursuit.

The mark was not always easy to follow — it would blend in with other cobblestoned lines that demarcated here a parking space, there a bicycle lane. Or it would meet a curb and disappear, leaving us to wonder: had it turned unannounced or did they run out of pavers? The line even slipped away from us — under fences, into canals, through buildings — but the trail never went completely cold.

In the end, we walked over 20 kilometers, drawing an eclectic section through Berlin. The bureaucratic, seemingly arbitrary logic of *its* placement was underscored by the variety of what crossed our path: suburbs, fields, warehouses, monuments, embassies, hospitals, and innumerable *döner* kebab stands. Usually the urban fabric had



been repaired as though nothing had happened, but sometimes the incision was still visible as an overgrown void. Other times, it was betrayed by a new city inserted in *its* place. Manicured parks, upscale housing, gleaming office towers; *its* destruction had been parlayed into Berlin's rebirth. For a while, it was the largest construction site in Europe; for a moment, it was the focus of the world's attention once more.

But just as the finishing touches were being put on the new skyline, demolition crews were carrying on elsewhere. Most recent to follow *it* to the grave was the Palast der Republik, the seat of Parliament in the former East and the most divisive monument from that era. It is curious that just as Berlin is coming very publicly to terms with its World War II history, erecting memorials and museums to its memory, it is also rushing to erase its more recent past. In a race to reinvent itself, Berlin is actively forgetting who it was. Soon it will be 1989's turn and there

will be nothing left to preserve.

But maybe that's natural. After all, hadn't we reinvented ourselves a little in running away to Berlin? Didn't we tell some of our old stories to new friends and subconsciously omit others? Weren't we trying on a new identity and wasn't it part of the bargain that we could bury pieces of the past at our own discretion?

Do cities bear more responsibility to their truths than people?

But even we were able to retrace the path of what was no longer there. When *it* had disappeared someone thought to leave a trail of stones, and such paths seem fated to forever surface. Even after the physical artifacts have all been erased, memory finds a way to live on. Just as *it* has in this article, present in its absence. And anyway, aren't memorials easier to stomach than monuments? ■

Coryn Kempster, MIT M.Arch 08, spent a year in Berlin working for Barkow Leibinger Architekten.