

# The legitimation of urban development projects through references to the past - an investigation into the case of the dispute over the historical design of Potsdam's city centre

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The article examines the legitimising function of references to the past in debates on inner-city building projects. The focus is on the different notions of the past of a place that civil society initiatives generate in the conflict over its future design. The work combines sociological theories of memory with conceptual considerations of place and legitimation. The case chosen to empirically investigate the question is a public debate in Potsdam (Germany), where until 2018, two citizens' initiatives were fighting over the demolition of modern post-war architecture in the city centre and the construction of a new district modelled after the former old town. The analysis, preceded by a media research, is done based on eight guideline-supported interviews with representatives of both initiatives and draws on the Grounded Theory methodology developed by Glaser and Strauss. From the material, three different legitimation mechanisms are identified, which demonstrate the selectivity and adaptability of memory. The past is remembered in such a way that the desired development a) acts as a continuation of the historical identity of the site, b) forms a memorable part of the local history, or c) appears as compensation for historical injustice. The exemplary mechanisms must be refined and expanded in future studies.

Urban planning - legitimation - collective memory

Preliminary remark: The article processes parts of my bachelor thesis submitted in 2018 at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, which I presented in May 2019 at the 2nd World Congress on Undergraduate Research at the University of Oldenburg. It is a written elaboration of the lecture script. My special thanks go to Henrik for the demanding discussions and Imge for her support of the project.

## 1 Introduction: The dispute over new old buildings

Cities are dynamic, they are constantly changing - also physically. Buildings are being renovated and rebuilt, the old being removed and replaced by the new. Since the turn of the millennium, however, the "new" itself has increasingly come from the past: In Dresden, the war-destroyed Frauenkirche was rebuilt; on the Römerberg in Frankfurt the Modern Town Hall gave way to a new edition of old facades; and in Berlin the reconstruction of the old city palace is just being finished (Vinken, 2016).



Where such reconstruction projects require the demolition of more recent architecture, heated debates tend to arise. In addition to technical and financial issues, they focus on the historical significance of the sites and buildings concerned. For example, in publicly denouncing a demolition as the violent forgetting of an epoch, or when speaking of the regaining of lost history in a new building, the speakers turn the past into an argument in favour for/or against a certain intervention. The past is thus not only a point of reference for design, but also unfolds a (de-)legitimising effect.

While the phenomenon of historicising building has already been investigated by various researchers,<sup>1</sup> the debates about building projects and the (de-)legitimising role of the references to the past contained in them has hardly received any academic attention. Also outside of urban planning, the political significance of the past is undisputed, but there is no systematic investigation of the mechanisms of legitimation.<sup>2</sup>

The present work is intended to contribute to filling this gap. As a case study, it examines a debate in which speakers aim to exert political influence through making their claims known to the wider public. The debate focused on a historicising new building project and the associated demolition of more recent architecture. Drawing on this debate, the work examines how legitimacy is ascribed to or withdrawn from future projects by involved actors through references to the site's past.

In order to answer the question, a conceptual framework will first be outlined. After a brief introduction to the case studied, the method design is presented. Finally, the results are summarised and discussed.

## 2 Conceptual framework: Place – Past – Legitimation

The connection between urban design and the past was already investigated by geographer Doreen Massey (1995). She observes rival views about the right design or use of a place to often go hand in hand with different ideas about its identity. Which, in turn, is usually derived from how the place has been in the past (*ibid.*, p. 185ff.).

Maurice Halbwachs (1991, 2016) answers the question of how different pasts can be remembered for a place. For him, memory is not a photo that does not change no matter how often one looks at it. On the contrary, it is reassembled again and again depending on our current needs and problems.

In addition, according to Halbwachs, memory is shaped by both social frames, preforming our perception and thought, and by collective memories, which are knowledge stocks shared within a group. Memory is thus a reconstructive, socially framed process that

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<sup>1</sup> Sociologically, for instance, reference is made to social disorientation and insecurity, which lead to an increased appreciation of the old and the stable (Boym, 2001; Lowenthal, 1985). Political explanations focus on the attempts of urban governments to attract tourists through symbolic buildings and to pursue image politics (Harvey, 1989; Löw, 2008). In cultural terms, the trend most recently represents the turning away from the functionalistic city of modernity (Roost, 2013; Reckwitz, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> For the study of specific debates, see Binder (2007) and Colomb (2012). On the fundamental role of references to the past, see Connerton (1989), Erll (2017), Harrison (2013) and Nora (1989).



includes both the experienced and the non-experienced and responds to current needs and problems (Erll, 2017, p. 7).

Schwartz (1982) emphasizes this last point by describing memory as "to place a part of the past in the service of conceptions and needs of the present" (ibid., p. 374). The past, from which Massey derives the present and the future, is thus itself a reconstruction - tailor-made for the current needs of those who remember.<sup>3</sup> The design of the place proposed by them moves to the beginning of the chain. It is no longer a logical continuation of the past, but the starting point of the memory process.<sup>4</sup>

It is thus assumed that the past of the place is remembered by the interviewees in such a way that the 'identity' of the place corresponds to their desired design. As participants in a political debate, the interviewees must convince the public and ultimately the responsible decision-makers. Tales of past events thereby become part of a political project's legitimation.

Legitimation is defined by Hurd (2007, n.p.) as "the process by which actors strive to create legitimacy for a rule or ruler." According to Weber (1980, p. 19f. and 122), legitimacy is the belief in the rightfulness<sup>5</sup> of the order in question. Legitimation aims at the convictions of a concrete audience and can draw on various justification mechanisms adapted to this. When legitimising through the past, it makes sense to link up with the notions of the past and the needs of the addressees in order to create a story that is plausible for them.

### 3 Case: Potsdam's contested city centre

The case examined to answer this question is a debate held between 2015 and 2018 on the planned redevelopment of Potsdam's city centre. The city of Potsdam, located on the western border of Berlin, was heavily destroyed during the Second World War. In the following four decades, under socialist leadership, the remains of the former Prussian Residenzstadt were partly restored, partly demolished and replaced. This also applies to the Old Market Square in the centre of the Old Town. While the Nikolai Church on the square was extensively restored, the ruins of the city palace were removed in 1960. In the 1970s, next to the church a spacious university building was erected in modernist style, commonly referred to as Fachhochschule (FH) (Klusemann, 2016).

This building was demolished in 2018. A small district is planned with facades and streets that are oriented towards the pre-war situation. But the demolition was long contested. For more than three years, a citizens' initiative fought for the preservation of the FH, with

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<sup>3</sup> Since this article focuses only on the mechanisms of legitimation, those current needs are shortened here to different building styles. The material shows, however, that there are symbolic and practical differences behind the aesthetic preferences.

<sup>4</sup> The past is by no means arbitrary. The social framework and the available knowledge leave only limited scope for reconstruction. Its arrangement is the focus of this work.

<sup>5</sup> Weber uses the German "Anerkennungswürdigkeit", which roughly translates to "the worthiness of recognition". Other than "rightfulness", which already operates within a normative system of right-wrong, the original term is absolutely open about the individual or collective criteria of deciding this worthiness.



various forms of protest, a citizens' petition and a large media presence. On the other hand, there was another initiative that for over ten years had been successfully promoting the reconstruction of buildings destroyed during the war or demolished by socialist urban development. While the political leaders kept a low profile, a heated debate broke out between the citizens' initiatives.

It was carried out in newspapers, at public events and on social networks, and it covered ever larger sections of the urban population. In all of this the past played an important role: There was talk of "Ossis" and "Wessis",<sup>6</sup> of newcomers and "Old Potsdamers", of childhood memories and of the "real" historic Potsdam. The debate and the references to the past used in it are the subject of this study.

#### 4 Method: Tools of qualitative social research

The research interest suggested a qualitative approach in which the focus is on understanding theoretical connections from the material. First, a total of 46 articles dealing with the dispute were selected from local and national newspapers. The two mentioned initiatives were identified as central actors in the debate. The arguments presented were strongly interrelated and always clearly assigned to one side of the conflict.

Based on this, guided interviews were conducted with four representatives of each of the two initiatives, with the interviewees being deliberately chosen according to theoretically defined criteria. The selected persons should already be known from the newspaper research and vary along categorisations made in the articles. The focus was on the interviewees' origin and their professional expertise in architecture and urban planning. The snowball principle, in which interviewees were asked directly about possible interlocutors with certain characteristics, helped to complete the sample.

The 40 to 100-minute conversations taped with a voice recorder were transcribed and evaluated with the MaxQDA analysis software. Inspired by the Grounded Theory Methodology developed by Strauss and Glaser (2012), the interviews were first openly coded, generating early-stage concepts directly from the material. To increase their degree of abstraction, one then starts to compare and refine these concepts, using the empirical material, other concepts and theories from outside. At the end of the evaluation process there should be a few theoretically well-integrated concepts instead of many loose ideas. These can confirm, supplement, modify or refute existing theories.

#### 5 Results: One place, two tales of the past

The impression of two clearly separable, interrelated narratives of the past gained in the article evaluation was confirmed in the interviews. Initiative A, which advocates the demolition of the modern building in favour of a historicising new building, narrates an internally

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<sup>6</sup> The terms separate East and West Germans, thus symbolically continuing the division of Germany into two different states with separate populations.



coherent story: The Second World War, they claim, only damaged the old city centre, the destruction was a product of modernism. Against the will of the citizens, the leadership of the GDR transformed the beautiful, lively city centre into a dead place full of clumsy architecture. The demolition of the FH, they conclude, would thus put an end to a historical aberration and give the citizens back the vitality and beauty of their inner city.

On the other side is Initiative B, which wants to prevent demolition and aims to renovate the modern building, giving it a new use. For them, the FH is a contemporary witness and memento for an entire generation of locals, which can stand alongside the already reconstructed buildings of the pre-war period. Furthermore, B rejects A's hierarchisation of buildings styles. Presenting pre-war design as superior or automatically creating a livelier city, they argue, is nothing more than painting a transfigured picture of the past. They also counter A's story of destruction through modern city planning, pointing both to the devastating consequences of the war and the efforts of the GDR to preserve parts of the old town in its pre-war form. What is striking is that Initiative B works itself through A's story without creating a self-contained counter-narrative.

## 6 Discussion: Mechanisms of Legitimation

The stories of the initiatives confirm and extend the presumption of different pasts, set up with Halbwachs and Massey, respectively in accordance with the intended building style. However, a past-based, homogeneous place identity defining all future design is only described by Initiative A. They distinguish between 'historical' buildings, which reflect the identity of the site, and a modern 'wrong track'. New buildings for them must continue the historical identity of the place and, if necessary, replace modern buildings.

Initiative B shows a different understanding of place identity. It does not result from a 'true' epoch, but from a multitude of different influences. Here, the modern FH represents one of several equally important urban development phases. Initiative A, according to the accusation, fixes itself on a single - completely transfigured - epoch and ignores the diverse history of the place. The example of Initiative B suggests a second possibility of legitimation through references to the past. The past of places can also be remembered in such a way that the desired buildings act as a memorable part of the local history.

In the first case, the legitimacy, i.e. the recognition of the proposed development, derives from its conformity with an asserted 'actual' identity of the site. As with political actions whose legitimacy arises through legality (Weber, 1980, p. 19), legitimation takes place through reference to a more abstract order. While legal systems, for their part, are founded on procedures of consent or the reference to shared values (ibid.), the 'actual' local identity is based on its past.

Initiative A opposes the reference to the diversity and contradictoriness of historical processes and the impossibility of a uniform local identity derived from them with the idea of natural growth of the city. They depict the pre-war design as the natural product of a centuries-long metamorphosis, which was interrupted by modernist renewal. If man appears in A's description of the post-war period as a politically motivated destroyer, he resembles a gardener in the pre-war period who accompanies the natural growth of cities. The



integration of historical contradictions succeeds here through the naturalization of social processes (cf. Pfister 2015; Barthes 2010).

In the second case, the past does not provide a blueprint for 'good' design, but a treasure trove of knowledge that enables us to shape our future. Buildings are interpreted as part of this treasure, which makes their demolition an act of political forgetting. The legitimacy of one's own project is claimed by its representation as an expression of a period threatened by disappearance, which is why both initiatives present their preferred form of construction as epoch-typical and hardly represented in the cityscape. Legitimacy follows from the fulfilment of tasks of memory politics, the importance of which is broadly accepted in society. (cf. Nora, 1989; Rico, 2016)

A third and final consideration can be added to this second thesis on the legitimising connection between the past and local identity, which aims more at the structure of the remembered past: The place's past is remembered in such a way that its internal connections make the desired development a moral requirement. Initiative A achieves this by structuring the history of the place into clearly separable, homogeneous epochs.

The destruction of the war and the socialist urban development, which lasted for over forty years and included demolitions as well as restorations, were in A's story condensed to a single point of destruction. While B describes a multitude of overlapping, often contradictory processes running through different political systems, Initiative A's narrative creates a deep rupture between a 'historical' and a 'modern' city.

The epochs created by the disentanglement of historical processes stand in stark contrast to each other. The pre-war city appears as a place worth living in that has grown historically, while the modern city appears as a wasteland created by a dictatorial regime. The new building is described as a 'recovery' of the historic city, which nullifies experienced injustice and restores urban quality.

The narrative touches on the legitimacy significance of legal procedures (cf. Luhmann, 1993) and relies on the authority of experts in urban planning. Above all, however, the legitimization of the planned rebuilding takes place through reference to justice. Not the agreement with a legal, but with a moral order - modern urban planning was 'wrong', the historicising is 'right' - makes the project worthy of recognition.

In summary, three mechanisms of legitimation were identified, one of which was already known from literature. In order to legitimise the future design of places, their past is remembered in such a way that, firstly, the 'identity' of the place corresponds to the desired development; secondly, the desired building development acts as a memorable part of the local history; thirdly, its internal connections make the desired building development a moral requirement.

The examples taken from the material demonstrate the selectivity of memory described at the beginning and its adaptability to the desired structural order. Contrary to the idea of a future derived from the past, it is the needs of the present that determine the understanding of local history. The material contains several mechanisms, some of them multi-stage, of which three were presented here as examples. A comprehensive elaboration and systematization of such mechanisms of legitimation by references to the past remains the task of further research.



A sociological discussion of the needs to which the different designs answer finds no space in this article. They are by no means unitary and the motivations to support one or the other side vary even between the activists. A central cleavage, however, could be found in the different concepts for the use of space the groups had: While the historicising Initiative A understands the inner city as a place of strolling and aestheticised consumption, Initiative B, the modernists, see the city centre as an open space, accessible to various social groups regardless of their social status. The different building styles are associated with either of these visions.

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