Remembrance in Schöneberg

(... caregiver of this place of remembrance believes the time to have come, tomorrow I must leave and that this will not be the last time. He thinks it is important to arrange things calmly and carefully, to plan for the transport carefully and calmly. Those of our members affected by emigration should realize that their personal behavior and the orderly fulfillment of all instructions will contribute decisively to the trouble-free execution of the transport. It goes without saying that, insofar as we are allowed to do so, we will assist our community members as much as possible and that we will do anything in our power to help them.

Even when the first rumors of mass destruction and gassings began to spread, the forced participation and repression on the part of the Jewish organizations evident in this notice had become so common, and the danger associated with resistance of any kind so great, that there seemed to be no other choice for those who received this harbinger of death than to adopt its matter-of-fact tone and prepare for departure. Many of their non-Jewish neighbors, in the meantime, looked on with indifference. "They say they didn't see," says Inge Deutschkron, who relates going into hiding in Schöneberg in her book Ich trug den gelben Stern (I wore the yellow star). She describes the attitude of the non-Jewish inhabitants of the district in an interview with Claude Lanzmann for his film Shoah: "They say they didn't see. 'Yes there were Jews living in our house, and one day they were no longer there. We didn't know what happened.' They couldn't help seeing it. It wasn't a matter of one action. These were actions that were taking place over almost two years. Every fortnight people were thrown out of the houses. How could they escape it? How could they not see it?" [see Claude Lanzmann, Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust, New York: Pantheon Books, p. 50]

While the memorial installation at the Bayerischer Platz is dedicated to the victims of the quarter, it also asks precisely this question: How could thousands of people ignore the politics of marginalization and destruction? How could they look away while people were gradually dehumanized, until finally they appeared simply as objects to be destroyed? (... in June 1991, the first phase of a Berlin wide contest to erect the memorial at the Bayerischer Platz was announced. (... Nine-six designs were submitted, and the jury selected eight finalists. After a second round of consideration, the proposal of Renata Stih and Frieder Schnick was unanimously chosen on April 1, 1992. Their design, an installation consisting of eighty signs bearing stylized images on one side and the texts of Nazi laws and decrees on the other, incorporates these basic ideas into a memorial which re-creates on linguistic and pictorial levels the political violence that had gone on in everyday life. The governing principle of the memorial is, in Stih’s words, to "make visible the conditions which led in an insidiously logical way to the destruction of the Jewish inhabitants." The memorial is meant to show, in other words, that the destruction of the German Jews was not a sudden, irreversible occurrence, but rather a slow process consisting of dozens of rules and laws - some quite petty - which culminated, after a number of years, in the deportation and murder of thousands of people. (...) The web of signs moreover does more than reinscribe the neighborhood with its history. The simple items and pictograms mimic the informational aesthetics of today's advertising, and of public announcements; the sign's neutral images obey, as Stih puts it, an "aesthetics of normality", an aesthetics that allows them to blend into the iconography of today's urban text in the same way that anti-Semitic sentiments and decrees had blended into public consciousness fifty years earlier. The information that accompanies the unremarkable imagery, however, is anything but bland: acting as a disintegrating agent within an otherwise integrated landscape, the semantic recreation of the socio-political circumstances leading up to the deportation of the quarter's Jews unMASKS the guilty surroundings of the past, even as it suggests that today’s society is vulnerable to similar affront.

Not all of the signs have an equal rapport with the present; the temporal specificity of the information varies from sign to sign. While some of the laws take the form of a simple statement without quotation marks or a date to situate them within a historical context, others are clearly tied to a specific historical time, safely insulated from the present by quotation marks. The strategic placement of the signs in relation to contemporary social structures further underlines the memorial’s significance for the present. In front of the post office, for instance, a lamp post holds the stylized picture of a letter bearing the inscription: "The time has come, tomorrow I must leave and that..."
of course is very difficult, (...) I will write to you. Before the de-
portation, 16.1. 1942."

The image of a bench hangs near the green at the Bayer-
ischer Platz and bears the notice: "Jews may only use those
benches at the Bayerischer Platz which are marked in yellow.
Eyewitness report 1939."

A little further down the road, a sign in front of a children's
playground says, "Aryan and non-Aryan children are forbidden
to play together. 1938."

By this direct association of anti-Semitic rules with today's
world, the conditions of fifty years ago are re-staged, and be-
holders are forced to come to terms with their own reactions to
violence that is presented in such a matter-of-fact way. The
signs in front of the park and the children's playground were
originally mounted without any dates at all, thereby not merely
contextualizing the past within the present social structure but
actually re-creating the social conditions of the past. The dates
were originally omitted in a search for what Schnochn calls "the
actual borders of this project," a search that quickly came to
an end after immediate and vehement reactions from the pub-
lic.

To add to the complexity of this "sign language," the relation-
ship between the information given and the image presented
varies from sign to sign. One group of signs shows a one-to-
one correspondence between picture and information. An
empty ashray, for example, is coupled with the inscription
"Jews are allowed no more cigarettes or cigars. 11.6.1942;" a
pair of swimming trunks adorns the decree "Berlin public pools
may no longer be entered by Jews. 3. 12.1938." Other signs
consciously and ironically make clear the discordance be-
tween image and inscription: the most poignant of this group is
the picture of a door bearing a sign hung slightly askew which
reads "Herz-lisch Willkommen" (Heartfelt welcome). The re-
verse reads "In order to avoid making a bad impression on
foreign visitors, signs with extreme content are to be removed;
signs like 'Jews are not wanted here' are sufficient. 29.1.1936." Another group of signs consists of symbols for
public services which remain the same today. Included in this
group are the Berlin subway's white "U" on blue ground, an
"H," the symbol for a bus stop, and the letters "DR," for
Deutsche Reichsbahn. These signs are particularly impres-
sive, since the restrictions noted on their reverse show the
gradual removal of Jews from all public and social life. And,
since the symbols are still used today, their status as quotation
remains open-ended, suggesting a possible - and actual - re-
kindling of xenophobia. One of the signs is hardly illustrated at
all: the law stated bears implications that go beyond pictorial
content and can only give way to visual silence. A solid black
rectangle commemorates the day on which, for many Jews, all
hope of escape was lost: "Ban on Jewish emigration. 23. 10.
1941," is the text.

The memorial is not entirely decentralized; the eighty scat-
tered signs are gathered together on three large billboards
placed in the memorial area on three sites: the Rathaus
Schöneberg, the Bayerischer Platz itself and in front of the
Gymnasium Münchener Strasse. Each of the billboards shows
pre- and post-war maps of the area, one from 1933 and the
other from 1993; they are superimposed upon each other. To-
gether they produce a topographical palimpsest of the past
and present contours of the area which reveals that sixty per-
cent of the neighborhood was totally destroyed as a result of
the war, partly by the Nazis themselves during Kristallnacht,
partly by the Allied bombing of Berlin towards the end of the
war, and partly by the process of demolition after the war.
Green dots mark the signs' locations, inviting an exploration of
the Bayerisches Viertel in both its past and present forms. Like
a frame narrative, the eighty images serve as a border around
the jumbled lines of the two maps as if to form a link between
the past and present, and can only give way to visual silence.
A solid black rectangle commemorates the day on which, for
many Jews, all hope of escape was lost: "Ban on Jewish emigration. 23. 10.
1941," is the text.

Bearing all of the pertinent material - the signs' images and
texts, their location, and the historical information about the
quarter - each poster becomes a mini-memorial. There's an
instructive difference, however, between reading the poster it-
self and actively seeking out the signs amid the quotidian
sights and sounds of the quarter. Unlike the billboard, the
memorial installed throughout the quarter does not provide an
even text to be read and understood immediately. Every sign
creates its own fields of tension between image and script, be-
tween script and content, and between sign and site, to be in-
terpreted each time anew. Moreover, the memorial "works" and
literally requires "work" from its observer through a clever
mechanical circumstance: to emphasize the signs' doublesid-
edness, the artists attached them to the lamp posts facing in
alternating directions, so that walking along the same street,
one is presented once with the text side, once with the image
side. The passer-by chooses between a double vision, or a
bunch of half-truths depending on the manner in which the of-
fered information is handled, for in order to get the full picture,
she must pause and turn around to find either the written
complement to an image or the illustration of a text. The effort
to see both sides of any given sign represents to the artists the
overcoming of a one-sided perception of the area's history,
and as such assists in the demystification of both past and
present.

Experienced together, the three aspects of image, text, and
location powerfully restage the persecution of a people within
the space of the quarter. Conversely, each of the three bill-
board maps can turn the quarter into a mnemonic landscape
par excellence for those who want to explore the past in the
present.

Along with the re-staging of past events in the present goes
the role assignment to the passerby. This role is not an easy
one to play. In contrast to more traditional memorials, for in-
stance the one at the Vélodrome d'Hiver, which ask simply
that one be a rememberer, a mourner, or even a survivor, this
memorial, by matter-of-factly presenting the anti-Semitic rules
and laws from the point of view and within the context of an
orderly and safe modern environment, asks its beholder to as-
sume the role of a potential collaborator or Mitläufer. Wander-
ing along the streets collecting one sign after the other, one
also comes to know the intertext of the memorial narrative,
that is, the sights, sounds, and social structures of the quarter
today. And it is in this intertext of normality and security that
the insertion of the laws and decrees takes on its most mon-
strous shape. After the first shock, even the alert stroller be-
gins to assimilate each successive law more easily. The me-
morial manages in this way to transform a temporal experi-
ence into a spatial one, as it reviews synchronically what hap-
pened in the Bayerisches Viertel over several years during the
Nazi rule. The role of Mitläufer literally unfolds as one walks
along the memory lines created by the memorial. The realiza-
tion of the extent of Mitläuftertum among the former inhabitants
of the quarter results naturally in the question of what one's
own reaction might have been had one lived during that time,
and finally what one's reaction is to xenophobia in Germany
today. (...)The memoriescape created by Stih and Schnock is
complex: it shapes a cultural memory of the past even as it
borrows a system of references which tie it to the present.
The memorial rewards those who consent to participate in it with
a new knowledge of the quarter and its involvement in the years
of persecution, as well as with the mnemotechnic to store that
new knowledge. (...) Carolin Wiedmer

This article appeared in unabridged form originally in: Alphabet City No. 4+5, Toronto 1995, p. 6-12 (Caroline Wiedmer, Designing Memories – Three Berlin memorials: a network of street signs around Schöneberg's Bayerischer Platz, architect Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum, and a Käthe Kollwitz sculpture installed by Helmut Kohl in the Neue Wache. See also: Caroline Wiedmer, The Claims of Memory, Cornell University Press, Ithaca/London 1999).