



I was fortunate to participate in a pre-doctoral training program at the Global Center of Spatial Methods for Urban Sustainability (SMUS), Technische Universität Berlin (TU Berlin), an opportunity that combined academic preparation with field-based learning. The program not only strengthened my ability to design and develop research proposals but also offered the chance to engage with experts, explore Germany's history, and reflect on its political and social systems. By connecting theory with practice, I gained a deeper appreciation for the contexts that shape both research and policy, and here is where my story begins.

Our first excursion took us through Berlin history. We visited sites tied to World War II, each offering powerful insights into Germany's turbulent history. Among them, the most unforgettable was the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, a solemn tribute to the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust. The 2,711 concrete slabs of varying heights create a disorienting and reflective space, prompting visitors to confront both the enormity of loss and the fragility of human dignity. Walking among the slabs, I felt a profound respect for those who perished, a reminder that history must be remembered to prevent repetition.

The second excursion led us to Wittenberg City, once the centre of the Reformation under Martin Luther and later a prominent university town. Today, however, Wittenberg faces challenges such as population decline, industrial downturns, and urban vacancies. Our visit examined strategies for sustainable renewal, including projects like the State Garden Show (LAGA) and the *StadtLabor*, designed to reactivate the city's potential and strengthen its identity. A particularly striking case was the Zoning Plan for new residential areas near the train station, aimed at attracting commuters to Berlin or Leipzig. While this project promotes growth and connectivity, it also raised questions for me: why invest in large-scale housing instead of expanding public transportation links to existing neighbourhoods? This reflection underscored the trade-offs cities face in balancing development, sustainability, and inclusivity.

Our third excursion turned to politics with a visit to the *Bundestag*, Germany's federal parliament housed in the Reichstag building. Once damaged in World War II and positioned near the Berlin Wall during Germany's division, the Reichstag now stands as a symbol of reunification and democratic resilience. Its glass dome, designed by Sir

## SMUS Trainee Experience Report

Norman Foster, is both an architectural marvel and a metaphor for transparency, allowing citizens to look directly into the *Plenarsaal*, where debates and votes occur. Observing how the German parliamentary system emphasizes coalition-building, accountability, and open debate, I was struck by the centrality of civic trust in sustaining democracy.

Together, these experiences bridged history, urban planning, and politics. From Berlin's lessons of remembrance, to Wittenberg's path toward renewal, to democracy in action at the Bundestag, I gained a holistic understanding of how past and present shape society. The key takeaway is the importance of linking theory with practice: engaging directly with real-world contexts not only enriches academic knowledge but also deepens insight into the social and political forces that inform research and policy. As this chapter closes, I feel inspired to carry these lessons into my doctoral research. The story does not end here, it begins again.