



The Affective Assemblage of Berlin: Narratives of a City in Flux

The first route of my Berlin fellowship excursion, stretching from the Brandenburg Gate to Humboldt University, felt profoundly heavy. The historical narratives, focused on the dark actions of the Nazi regime, presented a singular, sorrowful vision of the city. I found myself reflecting on a German comedian's joke about Berlin tour guides being obsessed with Hitler and the Nazis from @marioadrion. It made me question: Is Berlin only defined by its tragic past? Must visitors feel perpetually depressed? How does the city's material and non-material infrastructure create this emotional atmosphere? These questions led me to consider Berlin's affective assemblage—the entanglement of humans, infrastructure, and non-material forces. My aim is to propose a different lens for understanding the city's ontological multiplicity that moves beyond these gloomy narratives.

My perspective was shaped by three significant tours during my first three months here, all of which centered on the city's post-war history. I will use these three post-war excursion elements to narrate the multiplicity in Berlin urbanity through the lens of affect, sentience, and materiality. On our very first excursion, we visited the Holocaust Memorial. The architecture, with its field of concrete stelae, is a somber and powerful space. The day we arrived, a heavy rain had just passed, leaving a particular atmosphere of mist and dampness that seemed to amplify the intended sorrow of the site. I expected a quiet, peaceful visit, and for the most part, that was what I observed. However, I was surprised to see a small group of children playing an energetic game of

hide-and-seek, using the non-symmetrical layout and large concrete blocks to cover themselves. This sight challenged my preconceived notions of how one should engage with such a place. Is a memorial meant to be a space for sadness only? Is it a "failure" of the design when it is used for something else?

Figure 1: A post-rain scene at the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. The mist and cloudy light amplify the site's intended enactment and atmospheric power, illustrating how environmental conditions become part of a larger affective assemblage that shapes emotional experience.

Peter Eisenman, the architect, intended the memorial to be a place for visitors to confront its abstractness in their own way, allowing for a personal and subjective experience (Visit Berlin, n.d.). This echoes the ideas of Albena Yaneva's book, *Latour for Architects* (2022), which explains architecture not as a static object but as an ongoing process. According to this view, people are not passive observers but active participants in a process of translation, where they change an architectural space's meaning and function through their use. This is precisely what I observed. The memorial, being a massive international attraction, is visited frequently by a diverse public, including school children. Its design, with uneven floors and stelae of varying heights, is not just a representation of the "uncertain life of Jewish people," but also serves as an aesthetic and performative backdrop for photography, as evidenced by the countless "#holocaustmemorial" posts on social media. This dual functionality shows that the memorial site is not simply a space for one emotion. Instead, it is a fluid space, constructed from a complex and dynamic entanglement of the original design, the environment, and the diverse, uncertain actions of its visitors.

Our final excursion was preceded by a viewing of Wim Wenders's film, "Wings of Desire" (1987), which I interpret to be about sentient urbanity. The film's narrative unfolds through the gaze of invisible angels who perceive the city's feeling of trauma and gloominess before the fall of the Berlin Wall. This black-and-white film portrays West Berlin as a gloomy, noir environment where we hear the inner voices of its distressed residents. Like silent city observers, the angels cannot directly interfere with human lives. This concept of a more-than-human spirit watching over us resonates with beliefs in other cultures, such as those in South-East Asia where spirits are thought to inhabit natural elements, making people feel a sense of responsibility to care for them.

"All living beings, and not just humans, think, and explores another closely related claim, that all thoughts are alive."

(Kohn, 2013; 72)

The angel Damiel, as a powerful metaphor for the city's own sentience, resonates with Eduardo Kohn's (2013) work, *How Forests Think*. Kohn's approach reflects the capacity of nonhuman entities to animate their own meanings and function much like humans.

This is echoed by Coțofană and Kuran (2025), who explain a city's sentience as the feeling the land might have. Like this angel, the city observes everything, but cannot speak directly. Damiel's perception, however, is personified through his capacity to fall in love, which transforms his world from black-and-white into vibrant color. This mirrors Berlin's post-war trajectory: a city steeped in the dark emotions of its inhabitants, which gradually comes alive. This illustrates that Berlin, as McFarlane (2011) and Blok & Farias (2016) argue, is not a static object but an ongoing process, a dynamic and shifting affective assemblage of people, material, and emotions. The city's capacity to engage with and transform human feelings is further highlighted by this sticky relationship between humans and angels, a powerful metaphor for the intimate bonds that connect residents to other urban entities and to the very fabric of urbanity.

From the city's post-war recovery to its present, we walked through areas like the Europa-Center, Potsdamer Platz, and the remnants of the Berlin Wall. The city's atmosphere felt both familiar and transformed, a testament to its ongoing process of change. We passed by socialist housing blocks and heard the distinct wail of an ambulance, sounds that echo the film's pre-Wall soundscape. We saw the Victory Column, an enduring landmark that invites us to imagine a more-than-human city observing its inhabitants. Through this, Berlin emerges as an active agent in its own right, its recovery a dynamic process involving humans and other-than-human entities.

The Berlin Wall provides a powerful example of this transformation. The film's metaphor of the world shifting from black-and-white to color resonates with the Wall's history; it transitioned from a gray, depressing barrier to a vibrant canvas covered in graffiti. Today, the Wall is a mandatory stop for visitors, its physical remnants a palpable reminder of the past. Bullet holes and the names of civilians who were shot while trying to cross remain, a materialization of the sadness and border politics of the era. Yet, the graffiti on the Wall and surrounding buildings represents another narrative, or a refusal to let the city be defined only by sorrow. As Awcock (2021) argues, graffiti acts as street furniture, attaching new messages to the city and adding a layer of vibrant, ongoing identity to Berlin's complex history.

The Berlin Wall, in its remaining segments, has transformed its original function as a rigid political boundary into a space of new possibilities. During our tour, we saw how each of these fragments—from the somber Berlin Wall Memorial to the commercialized Checkpoint Charlie and the historical Topography of Terror—has a unique and evolving atmosphere. The East Side Gallery, for instance, functions as a vibrant tourist spot where colorful graffiti attracts photography, while the segment in Potsdamer Platz is surrounded by a modern cityscape of glass towers and bustling transport hubs. The Wall, therefore, is not a singular object, but a multiple entity that continuously entangles with Berlin's diverse urbanity.

Ultimately, these observations have allowed me to reflect on Berlin's multiplicity through the lenses of affect and sentience. In answering my initial questions, the post-war tours reminded me of the enduring human cost of war, which is still materialized in the city's spaces and architecture. However, this is not a static story. The city's affective assemblage has evolved through heterogeneous interactions with urban entities. To precisely understand this city, we must move beyond a singular post-war narrative and recognize Berlin itself as an ontological being, a material and non-material entity whose life, much like our own, is an ongoing process.

References

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