

By Robert Koech



Re-imaging our cities, to preserve our collective memories. Lessons from Berlin's Holocaust Memorial

Before the SMUS fellowship, I had traveled to several countries in Europe, but never to Germany. As an urban planner, I was always fascinated by the way European cities seemed so thoughtfully designed, and I often wondered about their inspiration. My only real impression of Germany came from history books and the painful memories of the Second World War. That made me curious, how had such a heavy past influenced the way German cities grew and evolved?

The fellowship, and especially the excursion led by Carlos, gave me the chance to explore these questions in person. Between June and July 2025, we walked through historic sites like the Berlin Wall, the Berlin Wall Exhibition, the Holocaust Memorial, and the Brandenburg Gate. Each stop was like peeling back a layer of history. The long walks, the pauses to take in stories, the quiet moments of standing before monuments, all of it left me with memories I will carry for a long time.

Among all the places we visited, the Holocaust Memorial had the deepest impact on me. I remember the feeling of stepping off the busy street and into the memorial's grid of towering gray concrete blocks. At first, the blocks seemed simple, almost unremarkable. But as I walked further in, they grew taller around me, swallowing the noise of the city. The chatter of tourists faded, the air turned still and heavy. My footsteps echoed softly on the stone paths, and suddenly it felt as if I was in another world.

It was in that silence that questions filled my mind. Does time really heal? or do scars simply change shape? And what role do cities play in helping us carry the weight of such history?

The Holocaust Memorial, designed by Peter Eisenman, is only a few meters from the Brandenburg Gate, yet it feels worlds apart. It invites you to get lost among its uneven pillars, to confront discomfort, and to reflect. The experience reminded me that some wounds never fully close. Healing is not about erasing what happened, but remembering intentionally, so that we can learn and ensure history does not repeat itself.

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As an urban planner, this realization struck a deep chord with me. Cities are not just collections of buildings and streets; they are storytellers. They hold memories that are sometimes joyful and painful. They give us places where those memories can live on. The Holocaust Memorial is a perfect example of how a city can hold history close, not to dwell in the past, but to guide the future.

I am leaving Berlin, carrying with me not just the memories of the places I saw and friendships that I created, but also a new perspective on the role of cities in preserving our collective memory. I also leave with hope and determination, to play my part in shaping cities that remind us of where we have come from, while inspiring where we can go.