

MEMENTO OF THE PAST SIGNUM OF THE PRESENT?

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The function of remembrance sites is seldom an uncontroversial affair when the recollection of the past is stripped of its sober historical significance and, worse still, reduced to a disneyesque themepark that is stamped by insistent trademarks defying the memory in question. Both Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin and Statue Park in Budapest unabashedly stand as prime examples of how the past is at once tainted and betrayed by cityscapes which are camouflaged by a hyperreality in which the manifold layers of unintentional forces remain deeply hidden. This article investigates these two sites as “interstitial crossovers”, which emerge when various influences generate new undefined forces in the city. Checkpoint Charlie is an historical site, Statue Park a creation, yet both sites are strikingly similar in their exposure to amnesia. The photos above clearly illustrate how a powerful logo can vie with memory and compromise the original function of a memorial site. Hidden layers are superimposed by economic forces which visually gain the upper hand and engage in a blatant ideological dichotomy.

CHECKPOINT CHARLIE For decades now Checkpoint Charlie has found itself in the midst of political wrangling as a result of endless disputes concerning the site just behind it, where the Berlin Wall separated the East from West between 1961 and 1989. The large signs “You Are Leaving the American Sector” and “You Are Leaving the Soviet Sector” are a perpetual reminder that this was no ordinary border crossing. It was one of three army checkpoints erected in the 60s to register and inform members of the Western Military Forces before entering East Berlin. As of 1962, Checkpoint Charlie served as the only border crossing point for foreigners visiting Berlin. Even the members of the diplomatic corps and the Allied forces had to use this crossing.

When the Wall came down, there were few buildings surrounding Checkpoint Charlie that were securely emblazoned in the minds of Berlin’s inhabitants apart from a fake wooden shed fashioned after the original erected in the 1960s and the eponymous museum documenting the history of the site. Indeed the surrounding architecture did not experience radical alterations until the first major wave of corporate activity began to sieze Friedrichstrasse in the late 1990s. The initial flurry surrounding the upper end of Friedrichstrasse near the S-Bahn station of the same name entailed glitzy boutiques and car showrooms, but the economic interest seemed to dissipate when approaching Kochstrasse running south of the S-Bahn, where pedestrian interest rested purely in the historical site of Checkpoint Charlie.

In the evening, Checkpoint Charlie invariably became a ghost town, with restaurants and shops closing early to coincide with dwindling traffic, particularly when the museum closed its doors to its last visitors. It was as if the after-hours no-man’s land was content to cordon itself off from the rest of the city until the following day, when coaches would offload their tourists in front of the Checkpoint Charlie Museum to catch a glimpse of the threshold that once separated East from West. A leisurely stroll after hours would satisfy the occasional tourist, but for many an onlooker there was little else to do there. Checkpoint Charlie simply lowered its shutters and shut up shop for the night.

Neighbouring retail stores had hitherto blended in unassumingly with the sandsacks propped in front of the guardhouse. There was very little in the way of a name or a brand to draw consumer attention to one of the most significant historical landmarks of the 20th century. All in all, Checkpoint Charlie remained aloof as an historic showcase. Until, of course, a slew of budget airlines arrived in Berlin and the

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[a]

[a] Statue Park, Budapest
[b] Checkpoint Charlie, Berlin



[b]

number of tourists began to rise. Vague signs of an economic upturn attracted the intrepid investor to the backwash of Kochstrasse and it seemed as if Checkpoint Charlie was to receive an economic facelift.

For years the building adjacent to the Checkpoint Charlie museum experienced a steady turnover of entrepreneurs: from bookshops to cheap bargain stores, the site remained an innocuous corner. Last year, however, the site began to assume a different countenance as the giant coffee chain Starbucks donned the juncture of the historical site with its jingling coffers. Checkpoint Charlie had lost its “splendid isolation”.

The relentless branding of public spaces, particularly at memorial sites, has an adverse affect on the ability of the individual viewer to take critical responsibility and engage in meaningful reflection on particular historical events. It is difficult to dissociate the kitsch souvenir shops and soldiers posing with tourists from the memory of the 1067 people who lost their lives attempting to escape through the border.

When I noticed that the Starbucks logo was facing the GDR emblem flanking the Haus am Checkpoint (Checkpoint Charlie Museum), I stood inside the Starbucks café to observe how the emblems were visually related. It was if the antagonisms of East-West were once again reinaugurated, but with a clear victor: corporatism and its creeping claim on public spaces. The Berlin Wall was removed due to strident political calls to emulate the end of almost three decades of division between East and West, but instead of inciting the viewer to reflect critically on the memorial site at hand, the current architectural pantomime has tourists rewarding themselves with a giant caffe latte at Starbucks, where they can comfortably enjoy the site from the plush velvet armchairs within. [c]

Not, of course, before the tourist has secured himself a souvenir visa procured from the uniformed guard, who dutifully beckons tourists to queue up for their very own name to be entered in a fake tourist visa. One euro for a simple stamp, three for those who prefer to have their “Ausreisegenehmigung” (exit visa) decorated with an additional “genehmigt” (authorised).

Checkpoint Charlie has become a travesty, a themepark spectacle which seduces its visitors to forget what they came to see. Memories of Cold War Berlin are being diluted to cater to consumer tastes. Souvenirs are admittedly inevitable fixtures at every memorial site, but the speed with which such public spaces are being consumed by corporate retailing seriously impacts on the collective statement enveloping important sites. Vodaphone, Coca Cola, Costa, and O2 are just some of the multinational names which use interim periods of reconstruction to hoist their advertising banners at Checkpoint Charlie before the next building is scooped up in a bid to ‘secure’ a valuable patch of land. Checkpoint Charlie no longer marks the memory of a crossing point. It is being engulfed by giant corporate networks overshadowing the importance of such sites and forced to kowtow to the dictates of its surrounding architecture. Farther afield at Statue Park in Budapest, a no less corrosive practice has raised its ugly head.

STATUE PARK Statue Park (or Szoborpark) situated on the outskirts of Budapest is a memento park with a gathering of monumental Soviet-era statues of Lenin, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, as well as local Hungarian Communist leaders such as Béla Kun. In 1989, at the end of the Communist regime in Hungary, many of the Communist statues and monuments were instantly removed and shipped to this site.

The park was designed in 1991 by the Hungarian architect Ákos Eleod, and was officially opened as an outdoor museum in 1993 to commemorate the second anniversary of the withdrawal of the Russian troops from Hungary. On entering the park the viewer can see Stalin’s boots on the

