

## Memory in the Digital Age – Space. 2nd Bergen-Belsen International Summer School

**Veranstalter:** Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen

**Datum, Ort:** 01.08.2015–07.08.2015, Lohheide

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The second Bergen-Belsen International Summer School took place at the Bergen-Belsen Memorial to discuss the challenges of commemorative culture in a global, digital and media context. The organizers invited 20 international students from different countries and different disciplines including history, communication studies and landscape architecture. Thematically the summer school focused on issues of space. The project aimed to develop an understanding of the diverse conceptions of space in academia and the consequences of the „spatial turn“ for commemoration sites on former concentration camps. The participants were asked to develop visions for the future of educational work at museums and memorials that connect the memorial space with the opportunities and technology of digital space. Examining the Bergen-Belsen Memorial as a case study, with its very different histories of the prisoners of war camp, the concentration camp with its sub-camps and the displaced persons camp at the former Wehrmacht-Barracks nearby, the students got in touch with different temporal and spatial layers of memory connected to a historical site that was constantly repurposed over time. The participants came from Germany, Poland, Latvia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Croatia, Armenia, Hungary, Italy, the United States and the United Kingdom, and wrote a blog about their impressions throughout the program, which is available on the summer school's homepage.<sup>1</sup>

Having been introduced to the history of the campsite and the memorial through a guided tour, the participants got an initial sense of its scale in the seemingly empty space. Original buildings and structures were destroyed after the liberation and today the commemoration site offers a picture of nature, vastness and „peacefulness“, which stands in

a stark contrast to its cruel history. These first impressions were vital to the introductory workshop by KAREN BÄHR (Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen), which dealt with the key concepts of space, memory and memorials. The students learnt about the „spatial turn“ as a paradigm shift in the humanities<sup>2</sup>, and connected spatial terms of centre, border and periphery to the past meaning of the camp and the present challenges of its memorial site. This led them eventually to the question what role the „authentic site“ may have to play for concentration camp memorials and how this „authentic character“ changes over time. Recognizing the multitude of spatial and temporal layers attributed to the site of Bergen-Belsen, the participants formulated important questions on the dynamics of places of remembrance<sup>3</sup>, authenticity and space which were crucial for the rest of the program.

In the workshop by STEPHANIE BIL-LIP (Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen) and SYTSE WIERENGA (Barcelona), the students tested the „The Bergen-Belsen Tablet and Room Application“. The application enabled them to explore the historical campsite with a virtual schematic map that visualized the topography, the size, dimensions and functions of the former camp and its sub-camps.<sup>4</sup> Via GPS the participants could navigate between two virtual reconstructions at specific points in time, which drastically illustrated the spatial expansion of the camp in the last stages of the war. The students compared the virtual interface with the environment today, and being surrounded by the nature of the memorial site, they agreed that the application offered an important complementary visualization of the camp area and the changes of the spatial environment throughout the last 70 years. The app gave them further infor-

<sup>1</sup> Participants of the GBB International Summer School 2015 / Summer School Blog / <http://gbbbb.org/summerschool/seminar/news/> (21.08.2015).

<sup>2</sup> Jörg Döring / Tristan Thielmann (Hrsg.), *Spatial Turn. Das Raumparadigma in den Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften*, 2. Aufl. Bielefeld 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory. The construction of the French Past*, New York 1997.

<sup>4</sup> SPECS / Bergen-Belsen Memorial / The Tablet application / <http://www.belsen-project.specs-lab.com/the-tablet-application> (21.08.2015).

mation through source materials, like drawings, diary entries and audio-files. They discussed possible improvements to the application, such as personal information on former inmates or British liberators connected to the sources. This resulted in a discussion about the specific expectations users may have for the application. It was proposed that users may benefit from a stronger integration of the app as a learning tool if it would offer cross references to the topographical and historical information available in the exhibition.

The workshop „Redesigning a Memorial as an International Project“ by MARCIN URBANEK (Sobibór Memorial Museum) dealt with the time consuming process of building a new commemoration site and questions concerning ethical and moral considerations of touching a memorial ground. Urbanek is one of the principal designers of the Memorial Museum at the site of the former death camp Sobibór.<sup>5</sup> During his workshop the group discussed the difficulties and negotiations that arise from undertaking such a multifaceted project and that are connected to issues of practicality, political interest, historical and moral sensitivity as well as aspects of symbolism. One of the main challenges discussed by the students was the incorporation of the so called „Road to Heaven“ pathway in the construction of the new memorial site, and the decision about which parts of the camp to include and exclude in a memorial concept. The discussion explored the conflict between the kind of experience professionals and historians would like to create for the visitors and what kind of experiences the visitors seek; this was tied to the previous discussion about the Bergen-Belsen tablet application potentially being made customizable to people's preferred learning styles.

The lecture „Grounding history, commemoration and meaning generation in science“ by PAUL VERSCHURE (Barcelona) gave the participants an insight into spatial recognition and memory building processes. In the light of a memory crisis with missing tangible traces of history in space and an absence of contemporary witnesses in the near future, Verschure's research proposed the combination of digital technology and space as historical and psychological reference to his-

torical sources to fill the gap. Verschure argued that with immersive reconstruction in an augmented reality digital applications can become an instrument to get in touch with the space of the crime, can help trigger buried memories of the remaining witnesses and shape the personal memory of visitors by merging them with spatial schemes of thinking. The following discussion reflected one of the key conflicts in memorial culture, whether to focus on physical monuments or the use of technology to create a more interactive experience. It related closely to the impressions the participants had themselves of the memorial sphere today and the project „Here: Bergen-Belsen, Space of Memory“ by SPECS (The Synthetic Perceptive, Emotive and Cognitive Systems group at the University Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona) and the Bergen-Belsen Memorial in 2012, in which the immense change of the landscape in the last 70 years was also addressed by former inmates.<sup>6</sup>

In the discussion „The Future of the Barracks Camp Area“ with Karen Bähr and Stephanie Billib, the participants reflected upon the approach to new space within a memorial sphere. Former Wehrmacht Barracks nearby the campsite were used by the Nazis as an extension of the concentration camp in the last days of the war, and the British troops repurposed the buildings to serve as lazaret and as a camp for displaced persons (DP) until the 1950s. The participants discussed how to include the barracks into the memorial's concept and debated possible thematic approaches for this new space. With the idea of focusing on the perspectives of the DPs and British soldiers' „life after liberation“ the participants expressed the merit of the barracks area as an extension to the existing exhibition. The discussion led to the reoccurring theme of reconstruction, with the barracks being the only original building structure of the historic campsite. The group de-

<sup>5</sup> Marcin Urbanek / Piotr Michalewicz / Lukasz Miezowski / Project to Commemorate Victims of the Sobibór Death Camp / <http://cargocollective.com/marcinurbanek/sobibor-presentation/> (21.08.2015).

<sup>6</sup> SPECS / Bergen-Belsen Memorial / Here: Bergen-Belsen / Space of Memory / <http://www.belsen-project.specs-lab.com/the-box-installation/> (21.08.2015).

bated the benefit of reconstruction to a memorial space and the possibilities of digital technology or natural pointers like the cutting of trees along the former fence line to make absent structures visible.

The workshop „Commemorative Art as a Challenge for the Here and Now“ by DANIEL CREMER and TUCKÉ ROYALE (Maxim Gorki Theater Berlin) discussed the role of art, art performances and symbolism as a tool in the field of commemoration to open up space for neglected topics and groups in education and commemoration processes. The founding members of the Central Council of the so called „Asoziale“ in Germany<sup>7</sup> presented their work of raising awareness to the invisible and un-rehabilitated victim group of the „Asoziale“ with deliberate usage of the label as well as the concentration camp symbol of the black triangle. Together with the participants, they discussed some of their actions to raise awareness, which involved the plantation of clover beds as „memorial“ space in places that have a historic responsibility as well as marking so called „Unmögliche Orte“ to give attention to the social selection of who is allowed to participate in public space.

The final discussion with JENS-CHRISTIAN WAGNER (Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen), ANDREAS EHRESMANN (Gedenkstätte Lager Sandbostel), Daniel Cremer, Tucké Royale and the participants as well as Stephanie Billib as a moderator recapitulated the discussions of the past week especially concerning the topic of reconstruction of memorial space. While the Bergen-Belsen Memorial gives its visitors an image of the set-up of space without reconstruction via digital technology, the Sandbostel memorial presented their solution by exposing visitors to the decay of historical structures and showing exactly which pieces have been replaced. By doing this, Ehresmann argued, they give space to all of their temporal layers. The group concluded that a „vivid“ memory site needs to show, as visitors tend to unconsciously deal with space in every moment of their lives, how to connect these palpable and mental approaches on space as a gateway to challenge healthy criticism, knowledge transfer, re-evaluation of expectations and emotion connected to

historic sites of crime and violence.

Conclusively, the Summer School succeeded in bringing together students from a diverse set of countries and disciplines. These scholarly and cultural backgrounds helped to form an environment that fostered interdisciplinary approaches and global perspectives, with each participant contributing new ideas to the attempt to disentangle questions of space, memory and the possibilities that come with technology. This often resulted in passionate discussions on topics that were for some participants very new and for others already familiar, but nevertheless always led to new insights and connections to their specific field of studies. One of the most important things that the group learned is that memory cannot simply be a process of grief but must also be a sort of provocation in order to inspire the visitors' reaction to memory, history and space and to spark discovery and connections of the past to the present.

#### **Summer School Overview:**

##### *Workshop I*

„Concepts of Space“, by Karen Bähr (Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen)

##### *Workshop II*

„The Bergen-Belsen Tablet and Room Application“, by Stephanie Billib (Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen) and Sytse Wierenga (SPECS/ Barcelona)

##### *Workshop III*

„Redesigning a Memorial as an International Project“, by Marcin Urbanek (Architect Sobibór Memorial Museum)

##### *Lecture*

„Grounding history, commemoration and meaning generation in science“, by Paul F.M.J. Verschure (SPECS/ Barcelona)

##### *Discussion*

„The Future of the Barracks Camp Area“, by Karen Bähr und Stephanie Billib, Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen)

##### *Workshop IV*

„Commemorative Art as a Challenge for the Here and Now“, by Daniel Cremer and Tucké

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<sup>7</sup>Zentralrat der Asozialen in Deutschland / <http://zentralrat-der-asozialen.de/> (21.08.2015).

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Royale (Zentralrat der Asozialen in Deutschland)

Final Discussion with Jens-Christian Wagner (Director Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen), Andreas Ehresmann (Director Gedenkstätte Lager Sandbostel), Daniel Cremer and Tucké Royale (Zentralrat der Asozialen in Deutschland)

Tagungsbericht *Memory in the Digital Age – Space. 2nd Bergen-Belsen International Summer School*. 01.08.2015–07.08.2015, Lohheide, in: H-Soz-Kult 21.09.2015.