

Places of Progress? Re-Evaluating the Sites of High Tech Controversies

Veranstalter: Forschergruppe „Meta-Peenemünde: Das Bild der rüstungstechnischen Versuchsanstalten im kulturellen Gedächtnis“ (Volkswagen-Stiftung); Institut für Geschichtswissenschaft, Technische Universität Braunschweig

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Bericht von: Silja Fitschen, Friedrich Meinecke-Institut, Freie Universität Berlin

Over the last two decades, the study of remembrance culture has received increased attention, particularly in the field of modern and contemporary history. Largely missing from the academic discourse up until recently have been the perspectives shared by historians of technology. Their approaches for assessing how collective memories of places of high technologies are created and what role they play in controversies concerning cultures of remembrance contribute to a cultural history of technology. Sharing their research findings and shedding light on debates surrounding the memorialization of modern technologies, DANIEL BRANDAU and CONSTANZE SEIFERT-HARTZ of the research group ‘Meta-Peenemünde: Das Bild der rüstungstechnischen Versuchsanstalten im kulturellen Gedächtnis’ hosted the conference *Places of Progress? Re-evaluating the Sites of High-Tech Controversies* at Haus der Wissenschaft in Braunschweig in September 2019. The conference, sponsored by the Volkswagen Foundation, aimed at investigating how places of high-tech development or use have been turned into heritage sites through practices of remembrance or musealization, and assessing the ways in which collective memories can contribute to creating divergent narratives that leave visitors and locals feeling ambivalently towards places of progress and what they might stand for.

In their introduction, PHILIPP AUMANN (Peenemünde) and CHRISTIAN KEHRT (Braunschweig), directors of the ‘Meta-Peenemünde’ group, mapped out key questions for the eight panels scheduled over the course of the two-day conference. As head

curator at the Historisch-Technisches Museum Peenemünde, Aumann suggested that Peenemünde is more than just a contested place of remembrance, in that it has become a „buzzword“ when discussing technological advances in weaponry and spaceflight during the Cold War, which were based on rockets developed by the Nazis between 1936 and 1945. Exhibiting the history of Peenemünde means telling the story of a modern military-industrial complex where engineers as well as thousands of forced laborers and concentration camp inmates were developing and testing weapons for deployment at the front, such as the so-called ‘Wonder Weapon’ ‘V-2’. Understanding its influential role in fostering a critical remembrance of the former military and testing site, the museum intends to showcase the complex collective memories surrounding Peenemünde and to reflect the economic and cultural ambivalences of technological innovation in modern societies.

Kehrt highlighted the productive approach of the ‘Meta-Peenemünde’ project when combining historical field research with museum work to help establish a proper understanding of the role that places of progress play within complex landscapes of memory. He acknowledged a lack of debate around issues of memory and cultural heritage in the fields of history of science and technology, emphasizing the need to speak about global „lieux de memoire“ (Pierre Nora) related to innovation and modernity from different, interdisciplinary perspectives. In this context, it is the historian’s responsibility to debunk myths and deconstruct how memory work supports notions of national identity.

Panel 1 focused on nuclear places in various countries around the world and their public reception. KARENA KALMBACH (Eindhoven) presented multiple museums and public history projects located either at historical sites or dealing with topics that bear an apparent connection to the ‘nuclear age’, such as the Manhattan Project National Historical Park in New Mexico, USA, or the Chernobyl Museum Kiev, Ukraine. She provided important questions and approaches for assessing the various sites. CHRISTIAN GÖTTER (München) examined how communities in Great Britain and West Germany have re-

acted to the construction of nuclear power plants in close vicinity to their homes in the 1960s, and explained the trends in opinion that dominated the public discourse about the changes and opportunities brought to the region by the new technologies. Götter argued that local residents were, at first, less concerned about the possible dangers of the nuclear power plant nearby; the initial hopes of progress only gradually developed into attitudes of doubt and feelings of loss in view of changes of the landscapes and the destruction of the beauty of nature.

Filmmaker and director ROBERT BRAMKAMP (Hamburg/Berlin) showed selected parts of what he called a „docu-fantastic film essay“ *Prüfstand 7* (2001). The film broached the issue of past high technologies and their effects on the Western way of life by interpreting the rocket as a catalyst for revolutionizing mankind's perception of time, space, body and life. The protagonist of the film finds herself on a journey to the early stages of large-scale rocket development when she visits the Historisch-Technisches Museum Peenemünde and the Mittelbau-Dora Concentration Camp Memorial in the 1990s. *Prüfstand 7* marked the first film project for which novelist Thomas Pynchon agreed to a partial movie adaption of his most famous novel „Gravity's Rainbow“.

Panel 2 raised issues relating to places of military heritage. DIRK SCHREIBER (Berlin) of the Deutsches Technikmuseum Berlin laid out how the upcoming addition of a reconstructed Me 262 jet fighter to the museum's exhibition poses a challenge for the curatorial team. It is now their task to come up with a sensible, informative and sober presentation of the aircraft that encourages the visitors to gain an understanding of the aircraft beyond its technical implementation and presents them with all aspects of the Nazi fighter's development history, such as use of forced laborers during production. With the Me 262 being one of the most well-known aircrafts in aviation history, the Technikmuseum wishes to demystify the Nazi propaganda-infused legends surrounding the object as a German 'Wunderwaffe'. Following up on the topic of (de-)mystification, BEATE WINZER (Berlin) gave a talk on the history of the for-

mer Tempelhof airport during the Nazi era and provided insights into the never fully implemented project of the „Weltflughafen Germania“. Winzer criticized the lack of a more complex collective memory when it comes to remembering Tempelhof nowadays, which she argued is dominated by the memory of the Berlin airlift 1948/49. She advocated for more visibility of Tempelhof as a military-technical-industrial complex and a more comprehensive understanding of the grounds as a former concentration camp and production site for forced labor. RALF BÜLOW (Berlin) examined the significance of architecture in the process of musealizing computing history and compared the transformation of the former WWII bunker of Howaldtswerke in Kiel, which was turned into a computer museum between 2009 and 2011, to the design decision-making process that went into building the Bauhaus-inspired headquarters for the Heinz Nixdorf Museums-Forum.

In panel 3 DANIEL BRANDAU (Braunschweig) and CONSTANZE SEIFERT-HARTZ (Braunschweig) gave a presentation on their research in the 'Meta-Peenemünde' project. Brandau traced the changes in the remembrance of Peenemünde and Second World War technologies in both East and West Germany from the 1980s until today. He revisited political, economic and ideological trends before and shortly after German reunification that played a role in the shaping of the contested memory of Peenemünde today. Seifert-Hartz offered insights into the visitor research she conducted at the museum. She demonstrated, based on data collected during group discussions with museum visitors, why Peenemünde is generally viewed as an ambivalent as well as contested place of progress. By contrasting group discussions held with German and American visitors, Seifert-Hartz emphasized the influence of different cultural and demographic backgrounds in regard to speaking about technological innovation in the context of modernity.

„Techno-Utopias“ were highlighted in panel 4, and DAVID FREIS (Münster) offered an interesting take on the perception of hospitals built between the 1960s and 1980s in West Germany as medical megastructures housing the „medicine of the future.“ Under the gui-

ding theme of progress, Freis reasoned why these medical sites quickly became the center of controversy in politics, architecture and medicine. He argued that many hospitals became relics of past futures already during their construction, due to an increasingly skeptical public that began to fear the future of medicine.

The question how sounds and images can convey or even symbolize progress-dominated discussions in panel 5, where visual artist ANDREW CROSS (Brighton/Southampton) provided glimpses into his photographic work on landscapes dominated or even framed by active or inactive technologies. Cross' inspiring thoughts on the driving factor of nostalgia for the creation of memory were picked up by ANNA PIOTROWSKA (Krakow), who then looked at the role of music in association with notions of progress. She convincingly argued, using the example of the 2010 film *Tron: Legacy*, that the movie used music as a channel of perceiving and creating a sense of nostalgia for the future.

Panel 6 tackled the topic of (post)colonial infrastructures. An expert on the Gezira irrigation scheme in Sudan, MAURITS ERTSEN (Delft) introduced the local and academic discourses on the successes and failures of the irrigation project, which started under British colonial rule in 1910/11 and developed into a model example of centralized irrigation systems helping to promote development in African nations after World War II. Ertsen raised the question how Gezira, today, can remain a symbol of colonial oppression and a symbol of significant economic progress at the same time. NORMAN ASELMEYER (Florence) discussed the key role of another African project, the Uganda Railway, in Kenya's nation-building in the decades after the country had gained independence from Britain in 1963. He argued that the fabrication of Kenya's founding myths around one particular object – in this case the railway – illustrates the nation's desire, and especially that of its political leadership, to find and determine common roots in the railway regardless of its inherent symbolism of colonialism, oppression and exploitation.

In panel 7, curator and historian MICHA-

EL J. NEUFELD (Washington D.C.) of the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum (NASM) looked at the role and opportunities of museums, specifically the NASM, to be places of progress that convey the oftentimes non-linear stories of technological process. In preparation for the opening of reconstructed museum buildings in 2025, the curatorial team is currently working out concepts for new galleries and exhibits that will discuss multi-faceted topics such as the 'nuclear arms race' and the 'space age' comprehensively. Looking back at the Enola Gay affair in the 1990s, Neufeld emphasized that the museum's restructuring process will also provide the curators with new opportunities to tackle intricate topics such as military history in future exhibitions. RAJENDRA THAKUR (Chandigarh) offered his unique perspective on the impact of India's space program on the country's promotion of national identity and discussed the Space Museum in Thumba, India, the site where India opened its first space launching site in 1962.

In the final panel, ERIK THORSTENSEN (Oslo) and KATARZYNA JAROSZ (Wrocław) spoke about natural resources as requirements and challenges to progress. Thorstensen shared his critique of the Norwegian Petroleum Museum in Stavanger, highlighting the ways in which the exhibition attempts to promote civic engagement regarding climate change and to appeal to the visitors' sense of responsibility, while also stressing the impact Norway's energy resources has on the people's national identity. In her comparative analysis of former mines in Romania and Poland, Jarosz suggested that the process of transforming closed-down mines into tourist attractions takes a toll on the local communities – especially multi-generational families. They have often been dependent on the work in the mines for decades and view the mines as places of identity and progress as well as pillars of their cultural heritage.

The conference's topic „Places of Progress“ caught the attention of an international crowd of scholars, museum practitioners, visual artists and curators, who came together in Braunschweig to discuss and compare interpretations and different practices of remembrance. The speakers examined how techno-

logical sites and objects have been remembered on a local, national and international level, how they are implemented to create cultural traditions and narratives of nation-building, and how collective memories support or undermine existing historiographies. What are *places* and how do we define *progress*? Are places strictly physical and necessarily visible elements of natural and cultural landscapes, or can places also be immaterial spaces of sound, imagery and even childhood memories? Is progress always linear and must imply *moving forward*? What role does gender play in memory-making? The questions raised during the panel discussions and the wide range of topics, interests and expertise presented at the conference truly emphasized the importance of re-evaluating sites of development and relicts of long-forgotten technological novelties, and to continue to critically question and contextualize the stories they are telling.

Conference overview:

Panel 1: Nuclear Places

Chair: CHRISTIAN KEHRT (Braunschweig)

KARENA KALMBACH (Eindhoven): The Contested Memory of the Nuclear Age

CHRISTIAN GÖTTER (Munich): Lost in Progress? The Displacement of Pre-Technological Perceptions

Film screening „Prüfstand 7“ and discussion with director ROBERT BRAMKAMP (Hamburg)

Chair: PHILIPP AUMANN (Peenemünde)

Panel 2: Military Heritage

Chair: VERENA BUTT (Hannover)

DIRK SCHREIBER (Berlin): The Me 262 at the Technikmuseum Berlin: An Aircraft between Technical Revolution and Forced Labour

BEATE WINZER (Berlin): Infrastructures and Heritage: Segregate Memories at the former Tempelhof Airport

RALF BÜLOW (Berlin): Bunker and Bauhaus: Lost Places of Computing History

Panel 3: Rocket Cities

Chair: STEFAN HÖRDLER (Wei-

mar/Göttingen)

DANIEL BRANDAU / CONSTANZE SEIFERT-HARTZ (Braunschweig): Meta-Peenemünde: Remembering Second World War Technologies in East Germany, from the 1980s to Today

Panel 4: Techno-Utopias

Chair: CONSTANZE SEIFERT-HARTZ (Braunschweig)

DAVID FREIS (Münster): Hospitals of the Future: The Rise and Fall of the Medical Megastucture in Western Germany

Panel 5: Sounds and Images

Chair: JANA BRUGGMANN (Mainz)

ANDREW CROSS (Brighton): An Archaeology of Childhood in Southern England: Rethinking Military Landscape

ANNA G. PIOTROWSKA (Kraków): The Role of Music in the Space of Progress: Revisiting Tron: Legacy

Panel 6: (Post)colonial Infrastructures

Chair: MARTIN LÜCKE (Berlin)

MAURITS W. ERTSEN (Delft): The Gezira Irrigation Scheme as a Contested Place Of Progress

NORMAN ASELMEYER (Florence): What Sired the Nation? The Uganda Railway and Memory Work in Kenya, 1890–2000

Panel 7: Outer Spaces

Chair: MARIE-LUISE HEUSER (Braunschweig)

MICHAEL J. NEUFELD (Washington D.C.): The Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum and „The Romance of Technological Progress“

RAJENDRA THAKUR (Chandigarh): Space Museum in India: Progress versus Development

Panel 8: Resources

Chair: JOACHIM BLOCK (Braunschweig)

ERIK THORSTENSEN (Oslo): Adventure and Tragedy: The Norwegian Petroleum Museum's Exhibition on Climate Change

KATARZYNA JAROSZ (Wrocław): Mining the Past: Converting Former Mines into Tou-

rist Attractions

Panel Discussion: Places of Progress?

Chair: DANIEL BRANDAU (Braunschweig)

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