

OLD MONUMENTS IN A NEW LIGHT: YOUNG FOREIGN VISITORS' KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE BERLIN WALL

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Abstract:

This paper investigates how young foreign tourists regard the Berlin Wall, including their previous knowledge base, perceptions and expectations. I address questions, such as: Does the on-site educational and interpretive materials satisfy this visitor groups' needs for understanding, appreciating and participating at the site? What approach (es) would this tourist group prefer? How are Berlin Wall sites, within the government supported Gesamtkonzept zur Erinnerung der Berliner Mauer (complete concept dedicated to the memory of the Berlin Wall) and Geschichtsmeile Berliner Mauer (Berlin Wall History Mile), currently transmitting the spirit of the place? This age group of tourists was selected for study because they comprise the largest group of tourists coming to Berlin with the specific goal of visiting sites associated with the Wall. Thus, they are an important group about which more information should be known. My assessment is based on 231 visitor surveys conducted at five main locations in Berlin: Brandenburg Gate, Potsdamer Platz, Checkpoint Charlie, Berlin Wall Documentation Center at Bernauer Street and East Side Gallery. This study produced new information about the background and interests of the young tourist group. Evaluations for each individual Berlin Wall site and its current presentation methods are presented in the study. New approaches for each site investigated along with an improved overarching concept for a stronger development of the Berlin Wall heritage trail also are presented.

“One thing French, British, Dutch and American visitors to Berlin agree on is that the once hated Wall, which separated the former East and West Berlin, is the thing they most associate with the German capital.”

-Der Spiegel¹

The opening of the border between East and West Germany on November 9, 1989 was more than just one moment in history. It was the beginning of an exciting and sometimes difficult chapter for Germany—a chapter that is still being written. While at the time the Wall was seen internationally as hated symbol of the Cold War, today international tourists travel specifically to see the Berlin Wall.

The government, along with other public and private institutions, has responded to the national and international demand to address the Berlin Wall as a monument by creating the Gesamtkonzept zur Erinnerung der Berliner Mauer (complete concept dedicated to the memory of the Berlin Wall) and the Geschichtsmeile Berliner Mauer (Berlin Wall History Mile).² While the ‘umbrella’ structured Gesamtkonzept addresses a majority of the remaining Wall remnants, its main function is to connect and provide interpretation guidelines for the Berlin Wall sites. Under this project, another concept was created, entitled Geschichtsmeile Berliner Mauer. Since its launch, the Geschichtsmeile project has erected 21 columns along the former Berlin Wall; with the hope of creating a successful heritage trail.³

Heritage trails are defined by the linking of historically significant locations throughout a landscape.⁴ While this can occur throughout any landscape, it most often occurs within an urban setting. In order for heritage trails to successfully compete with other urban tourist attractions, they must take on new approaches. The largest component is to address specific visitor groups and their needs; including multi-media presentations, personal stories, languages and relating the material to current events.⁵ Altering interpretations to speak directly to a visitor group can ensure a site’s future vitality.

This study reveals, however, that both the Gesamtkonzept and the Geschichtsmeile are currently not taking the needs of the largest Berlin Wall visitor group into account. According to the Amt für Statistik Berlin Brandenburg website Berlin was visited by

¹ (“Ostalgia ain’t what it used to be: Tourists Want to See More Berlin Wall.” *Der Spiegel*, (<http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,539223,00.html>) March 4th, 2008)

² Referred to from this point on as: the ‘Gesamtkonzept’ and the ‘Geschichtsmeile Berliner Mauer’

³ (Flierl, eds., 2006)

⁴ (Brochu and Merriman, 2002)

⁵ (Schäfer and Hünefeld, 2006; Brochu and Merriman, 2002; Linenthal, 2001; U.S. National Park Service, 2000; Childs and Corcoran, 2000; Jeffrey and Edwall, 1994; Knudson, Cable and Beck, 1995; Norkunas, 1994; Reigner, 1994; Samuel, 1994; Veverka, 1994; Tilden, 1977; Berlo, 1962)

6,465,000 foreign tourists in 2007.⁶ A growing percentage of these visitors are between the ages of 19 and 28. This age group represents the largest tourist sector in Berlin. It is interesting to note that even though these students have no direct prior personal contact or a deeper knowledge base of the Berlin Wall, they still come to see the global Cold War symbol of confrontation and tension.⁷ More importantly report being disappointed by what they see.

To measure this, graduate students from the Brandenburg Technical University in Cottbus (BTU) conducted the surveys in a relaxed face-to-face interview fashion. Teams of 2-3 people were organized and disbursed throughout Berlin in 5 different locations: Checkpoint Charlie, the Brandenburg Gate, Potsdamer Platz, the Berlin Wall Documentation Center at Bernauer St. and East Side Gallery. Each BTU Team was given instructions on survey collection and the surveys themselves. This survey method, while time consuming, ensured a sufficiently high response rate and gave visitors a platform to speak openly about the site. The interviewers aimed at collecting information on visitor characteristics and solicited opinions after they interacted with the site. While the surveys were printed in English, many of the students conducted the study in different languages so as to accommodate the visitors. Within the course of the day (8 hours of collection) 231 surveys were completed; out of this 28 people were from Germany.

Specifically, the interviews addressed the questions: Does the educational and interpretive material satisfy the needs for understanding, appreciation, and participation for this visitor group? What approach (es) would this tourist group prefer? How are Berlin Wall sites, along with the “Gesamtkonzept” currently transmitting the spirit of the place?

Understanding Young Foreign Visitors

Young foreign tourists make up the largest group currently visiting the Berlin Wall. However, the survey proved that the majority knows little to nothing about the Berlin Wall or the Cold War time period when they arrive at the site. They have high expectations to find not only general but also specific information at the sites they visit, and often seek further interpretations at more than one site. The interests of young foreign visitors should be addressed within the plan of the Gesamtkonzept and the Geschichtsmeile Berliner Mauer. Thus, it is no longer sufficient to simply assume that others understand history as we do. We must take into account what and how the view history prior to, at and after visiting a site.

Interpretations can be the key to learning about the past. By definition, “interpretation is a communication process, designed to reveal meanings and relationships of our cultural and natural heritage, through involvement with objects, artifacts, landscapes and sites”.⁸ Thus, communication is a process that works and interacts on different levels: the agency, the setting and the visitor. Understanding how this triangle (seen in Image 1) is balanced

⁶ (<http://www.statistik-berlin-brandenburg.de/>, 2007) See Appendix for further figures on tourist breakdown.

⁷ (<http://www.visitberlin.de> , 2007)

⁸ (Parks Canada, 1976)

or unbalanced at individual sites enables positive change. The agency refers those who control and regulate the site itself; the setting is defined, not only by the physical location of the site, but also by the interpretation materials provided; and the visitor, of course refers to those who come site. All three factors interact together, as follows: The agency informs and provokes the visitor to learn and ask questions about the site. The setting, although not a person, communicates and evokes an experience or feeling to the visitor. These two factors, thus, have a direct relationship with the visitor. And a visitor is affected by both his and her own prior knowledge, the setting and the message provided by the agency.⁹ As Tilden clarifies, “the visitor ultimately is seeing things through his own eyes, not those of the interpreter, and he is forever and finally translating your words as best he can into whatever he can refer to his own intimate knowledge and experience”.¹⁰ Although one can influence the agency and the setting, the visitor’s prior knowledge and expectations can only be met by conducting a visitor analysis. Once completed, a wide range of presentations can be used to clearly and appropriately transmit the information to the visitor. Involving a visitor in a site encourages future public awareness and promotes the site and education of cultural and historical objects.¹¹

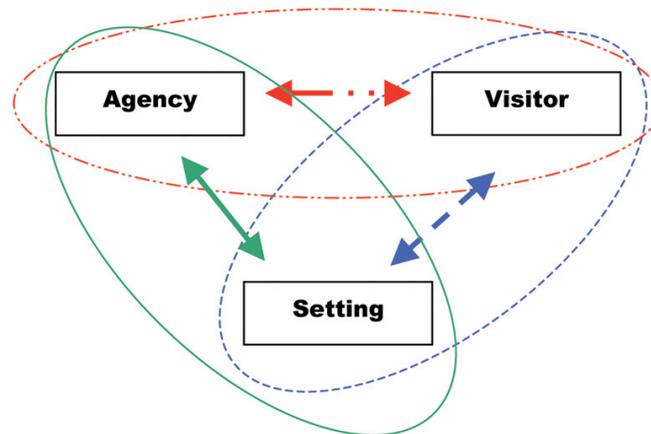


Image 1: Interpretation / communication cycle

In regards to the Berlin Wall, the agency, the Gesamtkonzept, has a specific message to convey. The Gesamtkonzept and the Geschichtsmeile have set clear objectives to transmit to the visitor. The setting itself also has an important message to convey, as do the current interpretation panels. This study shows, however, that currently, even though a clear message is presented and the site conveys a powerful message, this message is not being transmitted appropriately for young foreign visitors. Thus, new interpretation methodologies, such as personal stories or multi-media displays, can relate the site to the visitor; adding to their knowledge, understanding and interaction with the particular moment in history.

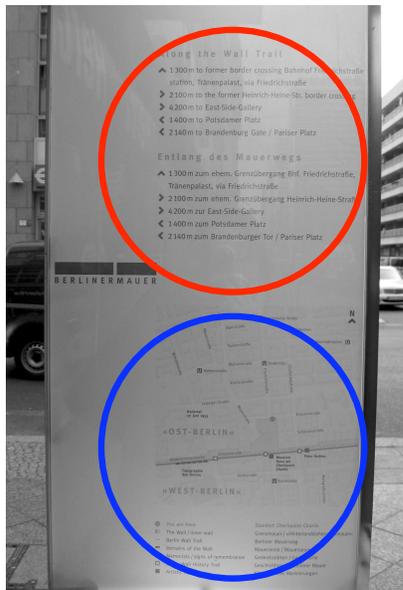
⁹ (Schäfer and Hünefeld, 2006; Brochu and Merriman, 2002; Pedersen, 2002; Linenthal, 2001; U.S. National Park Service, 2000; Childs and Corcoran, 2000; Jeffrey and Edwall, 1994; Knudson, Cable and Beck, 1995; Norkunas, 1994; Reigner, 1994; Samuel, 1994; Veverka, 1994; Tilden, 1977; Parks Canada, 1976; Berlo, 1962)

¹⁰ (Tilden, 1977)

¹¹ (Reigner, Gross & Zimmerman, 1994)

Currently, it is not enough for tourists to visit a singular Berlin Wall site. When this occurs, the tourist receives information on one aspect and interpretation of the Wall. In many cases even the tourist cannot even find a remnant of the Wall, but simply a sign indicating its existence. While the city of Berlin, private and public investors have made efforts to revitalize the Wall and draw tourist attention to it in projects such as the Geschichtsmile Berliner Mauer; many tourists want to see the Berlin Wall along with many other sites in Berlin. An effective way to satisfy the visitor in this respect is to improve the integration of popular sites into the Geschichtsmile Berliner Mauer. Since all of the sites are listed within the Gesamtkonzept and many of them are listed within the Geschichtsmile Berliner Mauer, this task should not be difficult. This would first involve the construction of columns at the currently, not included sites, Potsdamer Platz and the Brandenburg Gate. However, it does require a reorganization of material and information presented to the visitors. The problems addressed in the survey regarding the lack of prior site knowledge could be solved through providing visitors with a map Berlin Wall sites, indicating the heritage trail, and a listing of general information points (provided in various languages). In addition, the Geschichtsmile columns could be effectively changed to provide specific information about the site, personalized stories and a children’s component to attract younger visitor attention. All of these could be presented with differing types of media.

One of the main problems with both the Gesamtkonzept and the Geschichtsmile Berliner Mauer is their disconnected nature. Currently, only the Geschichtsmile columns indicate how far the visitor must travel to get to the next Berlin Wall site. However, the information is simply given with an arrow (directing the visitor left or right) and how many meters the visitor has to travel (see Image 2). While for those well acquainted with the city, this type of direction is often useless for those who have never visited Berlin.



Although there is a map, indicated by the blue circle, it is difficult for foreign visitors to distinguish where they are standing in relation to where the nearby sites are located. A clear map, also indicating where along the trail the visitor is momentarily located, would be a useful tool.

A simple map, indicating the location of the trail and the Berlin Wall sites, could display other Berlin Wall sites, thereby creating a more cohesive heritage trail. It would provide visitors with a visualization of the Wall and enable them to clearly orient themselves toward the next site; motivating tourists to go to additional sites.

Image 2: Current Geschichtsmile Berliner Mauer.

Either the panels could be single sided and be attached to a flat surface, or they could be double sided, possibly with a photo collage on the backside. Depending on the equipment, the maps could mirror the interactive maps on the Geschichtsmile Berliner Mauer website. In addition, these maps could indicate specific

themed routes along which the visitor group could receive information about the Wall in addition to seeing other Berlin highlights. For example, this could be modeled on the Boston Freedom Trail, which offers its users a map indicating other parallel trails, such as the Boston Women's Heritage Trail and the Black Heritage Trail.¹² Along these lines, Berlin could offer the "Artistic Architecture Trail", which could focus on phases of art and architecture, including East Side Gallery, or the "Neighboring Identities Trail" which would take visitors to various neighborhoods and focus on how they have changed over time. The most popular Berlin Wall sites, such as Checkpoint Charlie, Potsdamer Platz and the Brandenburg Gate could be used as hotspots for information on other museums and trails, while the Documentation Center at Bernauer St. could continue its function as the main point from which all Berlin Wall specific tours would take place. Regardless of their presentation or additional information, the maps should aid visitors in finding the next Berlin Wall site and seeing other important city sites along the way.

The second improvement involves creating general information panels, either in conjunction to or independently from the map. Currently, many tourists visit two sites maximum, implying that if one goes to Checkpoint Charlie and to Potsdamer Platz, they will learn about the Allied forces, escapes and West Berlin tourism. While these are important topics, they do not cover basic Berlin Wall information, such as when the Wall was built, for what purpose, etc. Such information is particularly important for those who did not experience the Berlin Wall from 1961-1989, specifically younger and foreign tourists. And as the visitor surveys showed, this information is not learned before visiting the site. These facts and figures can be simply taken from the Berlin city website, specifically the Berlin Wall section, which is provided in English, French, Russian and German.¹³ In general the information should address the questions: who, what, when, where, how and why, in a concise and interesting manner. This would enable all foreign visitors to gain general information no matter which site they went to, and enable the Geschichtsmeile Berliner Mauer to take on the role of providing more specific information.

For both the map and the general information panel the information should be provided in different languages. "More languages!" was the number one complaint at all of the sites surveyed. While all of the sites provide information in German and English and at the Brandenburg Gate information is provided in German, English, French and Russian, basic facts and figures should be provided in numerous languages. This can be modeled off the current Geschichtsmeile columns, where visitors can press buttons to hear the information in various languages. Since it is difficult to pick these languages based on tourist numbers, languages should be representative of the world; provided in English, German, French, Russian, Spanish, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, Braille and Arabic. Since a new panel would provide visitors with general information, the Geschichtsmeile Berliner Mauer could continue its function, enabling visitors to develop a deeper understanding about specific personalities or events surrounding the Wall. For young foreigners, such information makes the site more engaging and brings the Wall and the time period to a personal level. The visitor surveys pointed out, however, that currently,

¹² (<http://www.thefreedomtrail.org/>)

¹³(Found under : http://www.berlin.de/mauer/zahlen_fakten/index.en.html)

these columns do not meet young and foreign visitors' needs. These needs include: personal stories and a section for younger visitors, provided through a wide range of media presentations.

Personal stories enable visitors to relate and connect to the site. Learning about the human aspect of the site can make it more interesting for those who otherwise knew nothing about the site's history. Many of the visitors surveyed had an innate knowledge that the Berlin Wall was historically important, but could not say anything about life or experiences in Berlin from 1961-1989. There are numerous stories, both from Berliners and foreigners, from this period. Thus, it is simply a matter of presenting and integrating these stories into the column. A simple solution for this could be a recording of someone telling a story or explaining an experience they had at the site. This could be presented through a picture of a person placed over a speaker, next to which the visitor could press the language button (as indicated by the red circle and the red arrow pointing to the symbolic picture for the personal story) of their choice to hear the story. Hearing a voice telling about the site is an effective way to personalize the site.



Image 21: Concept for the Geschichtsmühle Berliner Mauer

Younger visitors are often more interested in the souvenir shops than the site itself. The Berlin Wall sites, however, offer numerous opportunities for younger visitors to engage with the site. One example of this could be integrated into the information column, at a lower level for children. The game could be called "I Spy" and provide the children with a list of things, objects or pieces of architecture that they visually find at the site (see Image 21, indicated by a red circle). If the child correctly identified the objects at each site, they could also receive a sticker from a nearby vendor as a reward. Pedagogically, this could be integrated with the site's Gesamtkonzept message, thus adults and children would be learning along the same topical framework at the site. This would also enable the adult to answer their child's questions about the site. Making the site more interactive and memorable for children ensures their interest in the site in the future.

Adding general, multi-lingual information, heritage trail maps, personal stories and activities for younger visitors is not an impossible task for the Berlin Wall sites and can easily be integrated into the Gesamtkonzept and the Geschichtsmeile Berliner Mauer. In addition, all of the material can be presented in a multi-media format. This would stimulate the visitor's senses; visually (though the map or video coverage), auditory (though general information and personal stories offered in different languages) and through interaction (for younger children finding specific images or objects).¹⁴ As seen in this study, visitors are willing to spend time at and learn about each of the Berlin Wall sites on a deeper level. However, they often arrive at the site with little or no background knowledge and are dissatisfied with the information offered at the site. It is necessary for private and public organizations involved in the Berlin Wall project to take on an active role in making site improvements that fit this visitor sector's needs.

Concluding Statement

Culture and tourism are often promoted as a medicine to heal the wounds of the past, as well as providing the fuel for post conflict recovery. In the case of the Berlin Wall, this process has taken nearly 20 years. Directly following the fall of the Wall, few could imagine that it would quickly become the number one city attraction for foreign tourists. Today, young foreign tourists, actively search of remnants and interpretations of the Berlin Wall, but are often disappointed by what they find.

The visitor survey conducted for this thesis revealed that the largest Berlin Wall visitor group is not adequately addressed either in the Gesamtkonzept or the Geschichtsmeile Berliner Mauer. However, both projects carry with them a numerous advantages and a large potential to meet visitor needs. The results of this study are meant to enable these projects to recognize the needs of their largest tourist group and to offer potential suggestions to meet these groups' special requirements.

Although improvements at individual sites are important, the survey revealed that the larger historical picture needs to be addressed. Above all, it is important to recognize that the majority of young foreign visitors have no or little prior knowledge of the site before their trip. In the survey, most stated that their reason for visiting the site was to learn about the Berlin Wall and to acquire a deeper understanding of the time period. Currently, the sites rarely provide such general and basic information. Thus, the first step is to install a general information panel. In addition, an easy to read map of other Berlin Wall sites and the trail itself, has to be installed at the sites. On average, visitors travel to one or two sites, without knowing that they could integrate the Berlin Wall heritage trail with other popular city attractions. Such a panel would encourage visitors to see more sites and learn various interpretations of the Berlin Wall. Regardless of the actual presentation or form of this panel and map, they must be presented in a broader range of languages.

¹⁴ (Schäfer and Hünefeld, 2006; Brochu and Merriman, 2002; Linenthal, 2001; U.S. National Park Service, 2000; Childs and Corcoran, 2000; Jeffrey and Edwall, 1994; Knudson, Cable and Beck, 1995; Norkunas, 1994; Reigner, 1994; Samuel, 1994; Veverka, 1994; Tilden, 1977; Berlo, 1962)

In regards to specific information at the sites, steps have already been taken in the form of the Geschichtsmeile Berliner Mauer. While these initiatives are helpful, they are currently not being utilized by young foreign visitors. Instead, many visitors simply walk by the columns individually, but do not observe them as a part of a heritage trail. As suggested above, a map would enable visitors to notice the columns as part of a trail, but yet another step needs to be fully recognized. This involves a re-conceptualization of the columns themselves, to include personal stories, and a section for younger visitors, provided through a wide range of media presentations. These media presentation should enlighten the tourist's senses and stimulate their interests. When this is accomplished the visitor will also be more likely to return to the site in the future.

By creating a stronger presence at popular sites, such as the Brandenburg Gate, Potsdamer Platz and the Documentation Center Berliner Mauer, Geschichtsmeile tourists will receive a wider range of information (from general background information to specific information about Berlin Wall characters and events). But, they also should be able to identify and learn about additional sites along their general city tours. Interpretations provided at these sites could aid in guiding the visitor to the other Geschichtsmeile sites or provide alternative and additional information about neighboring museums or monuments. Taking these steps will enhance visitor understanding and promote and strengthen the Gesamtkonzept and the Geschichtsmeile Berliner Mauer heritage trail.

Dr. Rainer Hildebrandt, founder of the museum "Haus am Checkpoint Charlie", stated it well in 2003, "We want to show the next generation how the world as it is today was created. This generation inherited a greater inheritance than any other generation before it—freedom and peace."¹⁵ While this statement may not be wholly correct, concerning current world conflicts, it does ring true regarding how the past affects current generations. Through successfully presented interpretations and heritage trails, that address the needs of younger audiences, these young people can become motivated to approach conflicts in a different way. As one young visitor from South Korea, commented, "Why are we able to tear down this Wall and see it in the past, but not the Walls we are building today? Come see and interact with the past mistakes, learn about them, understand them—and change the future!"¹⁶

***For comments and questions, or a complete version of this paper (MA Thesis) please feel free to contact Kate Pierce-McManamon at katepm@gmail.com.

¹⁵ (Hildebrandt, 2006)

¹⁶ (Interview conducted by BTU Team, December 12th 2007.)

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