

# Landscape, Architecture and the Construction of German Identities: Defining the Present and Future through an Exclusive Past

LINN SONG  
Miami University

## POWER AND THE GERMAN NARRATIVE

A dominant or hegemonic culture is rarely passively internalised: commonly it is negotiated, resisted or selectively appropriated by people in every day life. So too, cultural representations invoke both ideology and power, a power which is often institutionalised by dominant groups..."<sup>1</sup>

As our perception of the world becomes one of increasing complexity, unpredictability, pluralization and secularization, which is accompanied by an increasing number of discussions about technological advancement, ethics, globalization, and multiculturalism, the importance of a sense of place and the desire to define national, regional, local and individual identities appears exponentially significant. In Germany, the complexity of these issues is multiplied by the ongoing unification of the European countries and the burdened histories of German identity itself. However, it cannot be overlooked that the collective German history and identity is not only relatively short in comparison to its European neighbors, but is extremely complex, due to the fact that it has undergone several significant shifts defined by the unification of Germany in 1871, the period of Romanticism and identity formation leading up to World War I, the war itself and the Weimar Republic, the subsequent regime of Hitler and the National Socialists leading up to World War II, Reconstruction, the European Union and German Reunification. The present continues to be a time of identity formation as Germany not only comes into its own as one of the most important members of a stabilizing European Union, but faces critical decisions on how to present themselves to the outside world and simultaneously resolve a somewhat "self-inflicted" problem of defining the relationship of "Germans" and Germany's Others, who have directly influenced the wealth and "true" identity of postwar Germany.

In Germany, despite one of the larger constituencies of other ethnicities (in relation to other western European countries), a tolerant, multicultural environment has not been able to take root in the past 40-50 years since the migration of Gastarbeiter ("guest workers") began, spurred on by the economic blossoming of post-war Germany. The term "guest worker" implies that the foreigners are, or should be leaving once they are no longer "needed"; they are "tolerated guests". One could claim that German perceptions and definitions of identity are often dominated by historicism and traditions that attempt to maintain a sterilized and static enclave within an ever-changing environment, which, as a result, suppresses the identities of marginalized groups and hinders a more accurate reflection of the influence of the Other upon "German" culture. The current cultural and political discourse regarding a German "leitkultur" [authoritative or exemplary culture] is "the newest act in German 'self-discovery-theater'"<sup>2</sup> and has divided the nation into factions: the left asserting that Germany is a multi-cultural society while the right accuses the left of refusing to recognize the historical significance of Fatherland and Nation and urging them to give up "living a lie" and their illusion of a multicultural Germany.<sup>3</sup> Thus, current discussions are dominated by crudely formulated, populist overtones of the necessity of foreigners and emigrants to conform to a German "leitkultur", which intentionally hinder an "inclusive" understanding of a collective German identity.

## HEIMAT, HISTORY AND IDENTITIES: DEFINING CULTURAL TERRITORY

Defining the concept of "identity" in the context of diversity and a collective is at once logical and problematic. Identity is that which aims to set oneself apart and gives one or a group the sense of individuality, i.e. identity is the compilation of particular characteristics that distinguishes oneself or a group

as being recognizable and independent. As a result it is essential to discriminate what constitutes a distinguishing characteristic from a collective one thus, seemingly establishing guidelines of exclusion from the onset. Identity can be formed only if or after a condition of "otherness" exists. Identity has to do with perception of our world, the ordering of our world and the desire or "need to cling to any acquired order".<sup>4</sup> However, with this "need to cling", perception is often misused as "defense rather than the collection of information".<sup>5</sup> Herein lies the problem, for identities are often reflexive or self-configured but in order to nurture a cohabitation of inclusion, it is necessary to reinterpret and redefine ones definition of identity.

When attempting to define the essence of German identity, it is essential to elaborate on the notion of Heimat and its connotations in a historical role of the formation of identities at the individual, local, regional and national levels. "[It] is something concrete and specific, something physical one senses as compared to 'home' which is of the mind and cannot convey the meaning [of Heimat]".<sup>6</sup> Heimat, a term in the German language and psyche which cannot easily be translated obtains meaning and definition through a plethora of subjects (e.g., dance, music, literature) and across boundaries of social and political issues but, often manifests itself through the appropriation of landscape and architecture where it derives meaning from imagery and memory. The modern and foreign are a threat to social harmony and at its roots, Heimat aims to convey a sense of security and safety, protection, surveyability and "boundedness", for which buildings and landscape, as a physical or easily "comprehensible" entity, are optimal political tools to represent the collective products and artifacts which form, bind, and protect German culture. The physical environment is significant because it is a concrete, tangible or at least seemingly tangible element, which presents itself "objectively" as a collective product, or existing artifact, which everyone can comprehend, and experience simultaneously. Albeit, perceptions vary between persons and cultures, but it is the proposed possibility that in our physical environment there exists a concrete and graspable shared meaning or truth, which ultimately makes buildings and landscapes so potent and powerful.

The concept of Heimat has its origins alongside "Fatherland" as they took on national meaning after the unification of Germany in 1871. In the late 19th century, Heimat took on a more practical manifestation as opposed to simply nationalist enthusiasm. A program of saving architecture and landscapes (Heimatschutz) took root within the newly unified Germany, perhaps to give form to this unification – a need for a collective identity to be established quickly from a collection of previously independent states. Nature, depicted in e.g., landscape paintings as peaceful and pristine was utilized as a tool to appeal to the masses for preserving pre-industrial German values, including emphasizing the local and small scale while rejecting control by a national governing body, and against the city as a product of

the evils of "international" modernization. Heimatschutz promoted traditional building forms, folk custom, nature conservation, and landscape planning and romanticized "nature" and the countryside as an "ideological instrument of a bourgeois conservatism that feared for its power, [and] whose purpose was a defence of the status quo".<sup>7</sup> Thus, the landscape held within it everything that was German and worth saving while the city was shunned for its "otherness".

The Heimatschutizers began to organize themselves at a large-scale, national level, establishing the Bund Heimatschutz and slowly appropriated the landscape of the city as well, as industry and modernization took an ever-increasing stronghold on daily life. The Bund Heimatschutz pledged itself "to protecting the natural and historically developed uniqueness of the German homeland". Despite being a seemingly broad and open-ended mission statement, in reality the goals were geared toward preserving the "ideals" embedded in Romanticism of the 19th century. This is evident in their active role in efforts to preserving *visual* ensembles, which included historical cityscapes as well as natural and cultivated landscapes. Visual imagery takes hold as a signifier of German history and culture. The politics of visual tactics was concretized through the Disfigurement Law of 1907, which stated, "localities had the right to regulate the aesthetics of construction and advertising in 'historic districts'. It also gave regional authorities the right to protect rural areas that were 'exceptionally beautiful'".<sup>8</sup> The ideals of Heimatschutz were linked to a larger community and the regulation of aesthetics played an essential role to subvert individualism and its foundations in favor of a harmonious, unified society. In the representations of villages and landscapes, "details [were] consciously omitted, and the broad, horizontal perspective had the effect of reducing an entire town to secondary status in the landscape".<sup>9</sup> Not only was the human thus taken out of the picture but also, this strategy of representation underscored the built environment as an image/ideal picturesquely set into the landscape: simply blurring any evidence of subversion or non-conformity. A similar strategy can be seen in landscape paintings of the 18th century in which feudal lords had their property painted without laborers but with the family enjoying the manicured landscape beyond or in photographs of California landscapes of the early 1900's in which picturesque landscapes were depicted with the manor house but devoid of the human presence and suffering [of the laborers] which physically created it.<sup>10</sup>

Two additional programs on the preservation agenda, which further embedded the idea of identity with the physical environment, aesthetics and imagery was Naturschutz, which was established in 1906, and Naturschutzparks begun in 1910. These two governmentally sponsored initiatives were interested in protecting only "samples" of perceived ideal pieces of the "natural" German landscape complementing Heimatschutz's interest in preserving all of Germany's landscapes but especially the perceived ordinary ones which were the product of work

and cultivation. Nature was established as a measure of objective beauty of the German homeland and was depicted as being under assault from industrialization in order to unify the masses as a cohesive nation. As a detached, ideal image it assured people that "German" nature was there, outside the realm of the realities of industrialization, modernization and the city. As the chaotic city became the place of work and home to more and more people, "nature" provided a convoluted, disconnected image of comfort and shared pride/identity to those in the city who were exposed to the decadence of "uncontrolled" urban life and its heterogeneity.

During the Weimar Republic, nature and aesthetics continued to play the major role in the Heimat movement. However, it was in the 1920's that the theories of Geopolitics, together with Heimat, arose and were to dramatically alter the internal (German) and external (International) perception of Heimat. It was subsequently appropriated and abused by Hitler and the National Socialists.

During the period of National Socialism preceding WWII, the component of collective history and nationalism emerged in force alongside the established elements of nature, landscapes, imagery and aesthetics in defining Heimat. "...Ethnic-national motives [became] stronger than art historical and topographical principles in order to create not an inventory of that which exists in the present but an overview of what once was."<sup>11</sup> The emphasis on ethnicity and nation were "thoroughly consistent with the larger project of conservation, a cultural practice that in spite of itself remained fixated on the dead rather than the living."<sup>12</sup>

The National Socialists succeeded in "confiscating" Heimat to advance their political agenda, which was fixated on the idea of a supremacist German culture based on tradition and historicism. In 1933 through 1934 there was a concentrated effort by the Heimatschutzer to "purify the environment". Language became an essential and volatile tool of Heimat and the formation of identity. During the "purification" campaign, Hans Vogt, (who was not in the NS Party) the city conservator of Cologne openly called for a "purification of the image of the city" which "included eliminating undesirable people and replacing them with 'valuable national comrades'". Property owners were legally bound to rent only to "morally fit 'Aryan' persons".<sup>13</sup> The reasoning behind this action was that only Germans could preserve the physical city with an aspect of communal and cultural responsibility. The German or rather image of the ideal German was now integrated into the imagery of Heimat and thus strengthening the connection of Heimat and identity.

The manipulation of history for the production of identity was taken to another level during the 1930's. The formation of identity was no longer limited to inhabitation or the imagery and representation of landscapes, buildings and cities, but

extended to actual physical alterations of artifacts in order to "correct" history. In Cologne, from 1933-1938, the Martinsviertel (Martins District) was re-constructed to conform to a non-existent history. A total of sixty-five buildings were demolished and many others altered or even moved. Aesthetically "conforming" parts of the rubble were reattached as decoration on many new or restored buildings. In 1941, a new highway near Aachen was destroyed and rerouted so that one had to drive past a scenic, medieval fortress. Through the manipulation of memory, history was made more harmonious and cleaner than the reality of the two previous decades. Mere representation through imagery was forced to share the stage. Identity became a commodity, to be produced and forcibly consumed by Germans. Although the image was now "re-attached" to its subject through its true, physical existence, the physical reality was transformed into a distorted, disconnected fiction. The physical manipulation of the cityscape altered historical reality in the name of preserving a set of beliefs and principles, which had been tainted by the actualities of time.

The rampant and comprehensive use of aesthetics and consumption of politically appropriated images eventually spear-headed the "Blood and Soil" myth and cultural practices of Nazi Germany and became discernible in all aspects of daily life. There is an "intimate connection between the visual and historical texture of [a] city's buildings, the process of maintaining and restoring monuments, and the larger issue of what... citizens of a local and national community remembered and represented".<sup>14</sup> National memory "serves not only to legitimize the nation historically but to give it a purchase on the future, to ground the nation in a historical narrative whose ending is even more ineffable than the beginning".<sup>15</sup>

At the conclusion of WWII, Germany was once again faced with the task of redefining or reinventing a collective identity. During the 1950's the genre of Heimat-films presented a new medium of imagery and representation. It was notable that the Heimat-films avoided the difficult subject matter of recent German history and the current postwar problems. The bombed out cities were removed from representation, thus leaving once again the "natural" landscape as an essential element to grasp as the spring of Heimat feelings. Ironically, in post-war Germany, modernization and technology became essential elements, which would aid in the formation of the new German identity. The emphasis on landscape, modernization and technology made the prospect of the future less threatening, underscoring the beauty of and comfort in the German landscapes which still existed outside the realm of the demolished cities and the rewards and wealth technology would bring with it to every German. The means by which Heimat was presented, led to the further commodification of identity and nature. The image of Heimat was represented separate or apart from the physical reality of post-war Germany and instead of destroying nature, modernization was now there not only to

help save it, but also enable one to drive or fly or take a train to actually experience it.

The significance of physical space in the form of landscape and architecture in defining Heimat and identity shifts continue after WWII and beyond Reconstruction. In the 1970s and 80s, alternative and often more progressive definitions arise in which differences are perceived as positively influencing identity rather than something which must be defended against—diversity vs. conformity. The line between the self/collective and the foreign/other is not drawn in regards to a large-scale generalized relationship of nation/culture but rather to a smaller, more specific scale or level of difference. A city, which has its own distinct character, is one that possesses true Heimat qualities. The agglomeration of cities and landscapes is no longer desirable due to Heimat's move away from large-scale generalizations as well as the acknowledgement that difference—at least to some extent—is a component in identity formation at the smaller scale of cities and regions. Thus, during the 1960's and 70's, the concept that diversity can exist simultaneously within a collective, which underscored and served as the foundation of an integrated Europe appears to come to realization and take hold to some extent within Germany.

By 1975, Heimat had gained an arm of rationality, consciousness and awareness. The term "Wahlheimat" ("chosen Heimat"; which indicates a city, region or even country where one lives, "feels at home" or "belongs") becomes an accepted and commonplace notion. By 1980, landscape had reentered the picture, as threats to the environment (nuclear waste, etc.) by national and international government interests and corporations became evident. The mid 1980s marks a return of symbols of traditional Heimat that take the forefront as a marketable commodity in the form of rustic decoration and kitsch which take the somberness from the Heimat of National Socialism and reasserts itself as a part of a prospering post-war Germany.<sup>16</sup>

On the more earnest side, which accompanied the re-emergence of Heimat during the 1980s, theories similar to those of the Geopoliticians of the 1920s were the central focus of the historicists' debate [Historikerstreit], which attempted to analyze how the Holocaust could have ever happened. The argument resurfaced that Germany was in effect a victim of European politics. It was argued that the German Reich was denied an opportunity to develop a liberal protodemocratic culture like the rest of Europe. "The measure of domestic freedom of a state is inversely proportional to the external pressure on its borders".<sup>17</sup> The question of why Poland or Switzerland, with their central, strategic geographical position were not "victimized" as well, quickly arose to counter the "victim of politics and geographical determinism" theory in which "geography or the physical environment could explain the past and present political and social conditions and also gave evidence about the future".<sup>18</sup> The Germans on both sides of the Historikerstreit

were struggling to come to terms with their history and identity, as the one side emphasized geographical determinism while the other side took full responsibility and attempted to sort out and come to terms with the processes embedded within the German culture behind the Holocaust. Thus, in either case, not only was Germany faced with the task of confronting and redefining their identity, but the way in which they manifest it and present it to the outside world as well.

The complications of German identity were far from over in the 1980s. With the reunification of East and West Germany in 1990, not only were the Germans faced with the legacy of one unified Nazi Germany from WWII, but also the impulse that yet another new collective identity must be established from two, in reality, now quite different cultures and political systems which were divided after being so tightly bound together by Germany's darkest piece of collective history. The reunification, in fact, returned a great deal of the focus of identity formation back to a manifestation in the concrete physical world—at least for a short time—namely to the return of the capital from Bonn to Berlin and the subsequent re-construction of Berlin and its image as a "the" capital of Germany.

Berlin, with its "collective" history clearly possessed the most potential as the solution for a still absent cultural center and symbol of a renewed unity and national identity. The arguments for the relocation overwhelmingly involved the politics of representation and illuminated to what major extent history and symbolism plays in the formation of a collective identity in present-day Germany. After the final decision had fallen, the landscape of the city became the battleground of cultural, political and economical power and representation. In an effort to control the image and development of the city, already existing laws governing the aesthetics of buildings were strictly enforced and new ones created. The emphasis on the picturesque, on imagery, homogeneity and historicism in the city can be seen in the enforcement of building codes and laws that not only regulate, but dictate e.g., the forms of buildings or the amounts of fenestration vs. solid building mass based on historical plans. A new "old" identity is being cut and pasted together, sometimes based on historical "memories" of how the city once was (Pariserplatz) and other times attempting to emphasize how progressive (most often measured by economics) the city simultaneously is (the mundane developers' architecture of the Friedrichstrasse, Checkpoint Charlie, Potsdamerplatz).

Ultimately, Heimat is an ideology which artificially pits community against urbanity, familiar against the foreign and the natural against the built—all which are characteristic of culture/society—as a political tool of exclusion. Martin Walser called Heimat "the prettiest name for backwardness".<sup>19</sup> Heimat encouraged a nostalgic, irrational and emotionally driven tie to the state, its landscape and a purified culture. The appropriation of the physical environment in the form of landscape and

architecture encouraged a bonding with the earth and a sense of spiritual rootedness/belonging and conveyed the value of timeless beauty and permanence. Identity had become a sort of science fiction created through a narrative spoken by historic sites and cityscapes/landscapes that froze a sense of place and made it dependent on the existence of artifacts as a proof of its legitimacy.

Heimat and identity hold within them a perceived place of belonging and is "associated with a broad range of non-economic ties to the wider human and natural environment: to have feelings for your homeland means that you pay attention to the art and literature around you, that you are aware of politics, that you do not ignore the surrounding nature".<sup>20</sup> One could argue that these more or less positive values are rooted in a strategy of "negative integration, thus seem[ing] to imply all sorts of nasty chauvinism and racism".<sup>21</sup> In the early development of a unified Germany, Heimat asserted that the modern and the foreign must be defeated due to their threat to social harmony. In reality however, Heimat was repression and restriction presented as an ideal of cultural and environmental homogeneity and harmony and masked behind a shroud of permanence and security.

### TOWARDS NEW IDENTITIES: RETHINKING CULTURE, ARCHITECTURE AND SPACE

The legitimacy and sustenance of Heimat must be critically questioned in the present condition of post-modernity, globalization and multiculturalism in Germany. Konrad Buchwald asserts that we have made ourselves foreigners through the manipulation of landscape. "We have alienated ourselves from the natural environment, the constructed, technological environment, from work [processes and product] and from themselves", thus making Heimat in the 21st century obsolete.<sup>22</sup> Heimat's foundations of timelessness, permanence, homogeneity and harmony contradict everything that distinguishes a dynamic, modern, ever-changing society and attempts to repudiate the reality and undeniable character of social relations as one based on confrontation and conflict. As a result, Heimat, through its politics of exclusion attempts not only to eradicate past influences upon a given culture by "Others" but, denies a future confrontation with the Other not identified with the collective. The emerging state of ethnic and cultural multiplicities within Germany is perceived as threatening the stability and clarity of the collective culture and therefore the existence, or at least a sense of belonging for the individual. It appears that this is precisely the reason one is searching for identity in the past; in literature, language and architecture, as the last bastion of perceived coherency and cohesiveness, for "[p]erception of the past is determined by the needs of the present and is functionalised as a counterpoint to the difficulties of existence".<sup>23</sup> Based on the present political and cultural debates, it cannot be denied that Heimat continues to be an

essential element in the identity formation of Germany from the local to national level. Due to the legacy of Heimat left by the Hitler regime through its appropriation of the word and concepts behind it, the term is seldom used in political discussions but continues to spark debate when applied by the politically conservative parties as a tool of an exclusive identity formation marked by the "pathos of Gemeinschaftsgedankens [collective thought] and Nationalism based upon Kulturstolz [cultural pride] and feelings of folk supremacy".<sup>24</sup> The challenge of the future is rooted in the formation of a progressive identity (that includes architecture) that embraces a dynamic definition of a culture and collective, which is not bounded by geographical or national "space".

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Duncan, James, and David Ley, eds. *Place / Culture / Representation* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 11-12.

<sup>2</sup> "Operation Sauerbraten". *Der Spiegel*, issue 45/2000 (<http://spiegel.de/0,1518,101362,00.html>)

<sup>3</sup> comment by Angela Merkel, Chairwoman of the Christian Democratic Union party in "Ja zur Leitkultur in Deutschland". *Spiegel Online*, November 6, 2000. (<http://spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,101583,00.html>)

<sup>4</sup> Norberg-Schulz, Christian. *Intentions in Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1965), p. 49.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Nollendorfs, Cora Lee. "Fernweh-Heimweh? Attitudes of German-Americans before 1900" in *Heimat, Nation, Fatherland: The German Sense of Belonging*, eds. Hermand and Steakley (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1996), p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> Rollins, William. "Heimat, Modernity, and Nation in the Early Heimatschutz Movement" in *Heimat, Nation, Fatherland: The German Sense of Belonging*, p. 93.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 96.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 97.

<sup>10</sup> Mitchell, Don. *The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 13-17.

<sup>11</sup> Koshar, Rudy. "The Antinomies of Heimat" in *Heimat, Nation, Fatherland: The German Sense of Belonging*, p. 124.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 124.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 123.

<sup>14</sup> Koshar, Rudy. *Germany's Transient Pasts: Preservation and National Memory in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), p. xii.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Wickham, Christopher J., *Constructing Heimat in Postwar Germany*, (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1999), pp. 18-20.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 195.

<sup>18</sup> Bassin, Mark. "Geopolitics in the Historikerstreit: The Strange Return of Mittellage" in *Heimat, Nation, Fatherland*, p. 201.

<sup>19</sup> Wickham, *Constructing Heimat*, p. vi.

<sup>20</sup> Rollins. "Heimat, Modernity, and Nation in the Early Heimatschutz Movement" in *Heimat, Nation, Fatherland: The German Sense of Belonging*, p.101.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 101-102.

<sup>22</sup> Wickham, *Constructing Heimat*, p.56.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 66.

<sup>24</sup> "Operation Sauerbraten". *Der Spiegel*, issue 45/2000 (<http://spiegel.de/0,1518,101362,00.html>)