Cultural-Political Palimpsests:
The Reich Aviation Ministry and
the Multiple Temporalities of Dictatorship

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What is now emerging is the more intriguing notion of Berlin as palimpsest, a disparate city-text that is being rewritten while previous text is preserved, traces are restored, erasures documented, all of it resulting in a complex web of historical markers that point to the continuing heterogeneous life of a vital city that is as ambivalent of its built past as it is of its urban future.

—Andreas Huyssen, Present Pasts

Even in Berlin few sites embody the complex processes of urban-historical erasure and rewriting in quite the same way as the Detlev-Rohwedder-Haus, the imposing and rather severe government building on the corner of Wilhelmstraße and Leipziger Straße. Designed by Ernst Sagebiel in 1935 as the inaugural Reich Aviation Ministry, the current seat of the Federal Finance Ministry was the first major government building to be completed in Berlin by the National Socialist regime. Perhaps surprisingly for a project that graced the front cover of architectural periodicals during the Third Reich and that was

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invested with so much ideological value, the Aviation Ministry building sur-
vived successive Allied bombardments and the advance of Soviet troops in
1945. It also took on a new official role in the German Democratic Republic
(GDR), first as the temporary meeting place of the People’s Chamber and then
as the House of Ministries. Indeed, it is one of history’s ironies that the first
socialist state on German soil was founded in the large ceremonial hall in
which Hermann Göring had previously entertained visiting dignitaries. At the
center of the uprisings of June 17, 1953, and then almost bisected by the Berlin
Wall, the building gradually lost significance in the later decades of the GDR.
After a brief period in the early 1990s as the home of the Treuhandanstalt, the
body responsible for dismantling the GDR’s central economy, the building was
earmarked for demolition, only to be spared and refurbished for the arrival of
the Finance Ministry in August 1999. As one local Berlin newspaper put it in
the late 1990s, at the height of the controversy over the site’s future, this is a
building “like a book,” where successive chapters of twentieth-century Ger-
man history can be read. Or, to draw on Andreas Huyssen’s conceptualization
of present-day Berlin, this is a building where the accumulated layerings of
history and memory function as a “palimpsest,” a multiple urban narrative in
which “a richness of traces and memories, restorations and new constructions”
are written across numerous “voids, illegibilities, and erasures.”

These processes are at their most overt and intense in the small public
square that forms the building’s frontage on Leipziger Straße. Installed in the
pavement in front is a photograph etched in glass, recording the workers’ dem-
onstrations of June 17, 1953. Surrounded by a small stone frame and enlarged
to measure twenty-five meters by four meters, Wolfgang Rüppel’s Memorial to
the Victims of June 17, 1953 is consciously designed to parallel the dimensions
and positioning of a GDR-era mural realized in ceramic tiles and housed in the
building’s north colonnade. The memorial’s intended function, as a historical
and ideological counterweight to Max Lingner’s relentlessly bright and uplift-
ing depiction of early East German socialism, is clear enough. Opening an
exhibition devoted to Lingner’s mural in 2002, the Federal Finance Minister
Hans Eichel viewed the memorial as a welcome antidote to the allure of GDR
nostalgia: “It is, as it were, a reflection; ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ socialism standing

Eberhard Schultz, and Klaus Wettig, Bundesfinanzministerium: Ein belasteter Ort? (Berlin: Par-
thas, 2001), 54.
2. Andreas Huyssen, Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory (Stanford,
CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 81, 84.
opposite one another. . . . This memorial acts as a necessary commentary on the mural.\textsuperscript{3} However, as Anna Saunders has argued, even this attempt to integrate the site into a comforting binary narrative for the new Berlin republic—one that contrasts the historically documented democratic impulses of the demonstrators with the propaganda images of GDR “totalitarianism”—has not proved wholly successful.\textsuperscript{4} The lack of visibility of Rüppel’s memorial has prompted calls to amplify its message by surrounding it with additional signifiers of the Western narrative of June 17. Even where the writing of cultural memory is apparently at its most deliberate and tightly controlled, it seems that the multiple layers of the city-text permit considerable ambiguity.

The emphasis on plurality and hybridity makes it easy to appreciate the attractions of the palimpsest metaphor for attempts to conceptualize the politics of memory in the contemporary, postmodern urban environment. However, my focus in this article is slightly different. Rather than discuss the functioning of the Aviation Ministry as a palimpsest in the highly congested scholarly territory of post-Wende memory politics, I intend to follow a less beaten path and explore the usefulness of these concepts in the cultural history of the dictatorships themselves. Drawing on Sarah Dillon’s theoretical examination of the palimpsest figure, I examine the history of the site from two complementary perspectives. Through a “palimpsestic” analysis of the Ministry building, I interrogate archival and other contemporary sources to uncover the layering that took place at the Ministry site at two key moments of cultural-political appropriation: in the first part of the article, at the time of the original design and construction of the building under National Socialism in 1934–36; and in the second part, at the time of the composition and installation of Lingner’s mural in the GDR in 1950–53. Out of this analysis develops an increasingly “palimpsestuous” reading of the site, a perspective that emphasizes the “involved” structure resulting from these processes of layering “where otherwise unrelated texts are involved and entangled, intricately interwoven, interrupting and inhabiting each other.”\textsuperscript{5} As I show, remarkably similar patterns


\textsuperscript{5} Sarah Dillon, “Reinscribing De Quincey’s Palimpsest: The Significance of the Palimpsest in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Studies,” Textual Practice 19, no. 3 (2005): 245. For discussion of the distinction between “palimpsestic” and “palimpsestuous” readings, see 252–58.
emerge in each dictatorship, as the site’s cultural-political present was inhabited not only by the regimes’ ideological projections of the future but also by persistent and often subversive traces of the cultural-historical past. Thus this analysis of the Ministry site highlights the profoundly and inherently ambivalent temporalities generated by the cultural-political projects of the twentieth-century dictatorships, as well as develops the palimpsest figure as a conceptual tool for reading such sites across these two complementary dimensions.

1934–1936: Fascist Modernism and the Nostalgia for the Future

Just two months after Ernst Sagebiel had received the commission for the Reich Aviation ministry building in December 1934, the demolition and removal of about 260,000 cubic meters of existing building material began.6 Two weeks later, in mid-February 1935, construction was under way at eight locations on the site, and by the time of the topping-out ceremony in October, work was so far advanced that a thousand rooms in the new building were already occupied. By the summer of 1936 work was complete on the five-story frontage, which ran from 81 to 98 Wilhelmstraße; the seven-story main building, which ran parallel to Wilhelmstraße and formed an L-shape with the Leipziger Straße frontage; and the four four-story wings, which extended back into the small park at the rear of the site. Within eighteen months the largest office building in Berlin had been built from scratch, boasting fifty-five-thousand square meters of floor space, two thousand individual offices, and seven kilometers of corridors, including a straight 235-meter stretch down the main part of the building. For Herbert Hoffmann, writing in Moderne Bauformen in August 1936, the building’s significance was clear. This was the first high-prestige project completed by the regime in Berlin and the largest new project anywhere in Germany. Situated in the city center, close to Potsdamer Platz and in the government district, this “powerful” building demanded attention.7

Hoffmann’s was one of a succession of articles in architectural periodicals that granted the new Ministry building a representative function for the new Reich.8 These articles repeatedly stressed two aspects of the project’s

impact on the Berlin cityscape: first, the speed and decisiveness of the erasure that made way for the new building, and second, the scale of the new construction and its capacity to redefine the district’s architectural principles. As one of these contemporary accounts made clear, “The generosity of scale, the confidence and decisiveness which has made a whole street vanish to accommodate our new needs, is impressive and exemplary in its significance” (VB, 82). Notably, the demolition of the buildings that had previously occupied the site was coded positively. The decision to tear down a whole district was characterized as “far-reaching” and “courageous” (VB, 82), evidence of the “self-assurance of a new era” (VB, 81). As such, the building claimed not only to embody the state and the nation but also to redefine established conceptions of Berlin: “The more frequently one looks at the building, the clearer it becomes that a construction of such scale no longer fits the image of the city that we have carried in our minds up until now. It creates principles of its own, a change which future planning will have to follow” (HH, 426). Rather than conform anxiously to its existing environment, the building was seen to have arisen “according to its own laws” (VB, 82). It had gone beyond the usually binding planning principles of “modesty and compliance” (VB, 82) and imposed its own scale on its surroundings. This was the rapid and wholesale erasure of the existing city-text and the very deliberate attempt to write a new ideological narrative in its place.

The building also represented the new state in its pared down and stone-clad neoclassicism, as the Ministry sought to write a distinctive architectural style onto the empty site. Its uniform thirty-thousand-square-meter facade of stark German limestone was itself an overt marker of that intention, the “brutality in stone” of National Socialist architecture memorably invoked by Alexander Kluge in his 1962 film of the same name. Most of all, it was at two symbolically loaded locations that the building bore the unmistakable ideological imprint of National Socialism. The otherwise regular and perpendicular rows of identically sized, unornamented windows were interrupted on the corner of Leipziger Straße and at the center of the long Wilhelmstraße elevation by much taller windows with prominent stone surrounds, which betrayed the two formal halls incorporated into the design. On Wilhelmstraße the great hall faced out onto a ceremonial courtyard, or Ehrenhof; on Leipziger Straße a smaller hall overlooked the public square where Rüppel’s memorial to June 17, 1953, now stands. At both locations, the building was dressed in the overt symbolism of militarism, nationalism, and the Party. The imperial eagle, iron cross, and swastika adorned the balconies facing the Ehrenhof and the gateposts on Wilhelmstraße, further ideological iconography was cut into the building’s
stone pillars, and a relief depicting military commanders was added to the
Leipziger Straße elevation. This stonework by Walther Lemcke and Otto
Douglas-Hill was supplemented in 1941 with a military relief by Arno Wald-
schmidt, which was installed in the north colonnade on Leipziger Straße.
Overwritten with this ideological text, the Ministry represented for Hoffmann
not only the Reich’s military strength but also its “cultural will” (HH, 426).
Friedrich Paulsen phrased his assessment in more rhetorical terms, claiming
the building as the expression of a new era and as an appropriate symbol of the
“yearning” of Sagebiel’s time and his “Volk” (FP, 85–86).

Yet closer inspection of the original Aviation Ministry project is apt to
undermine the official narrative’s rhetoric of erasure and rewriting. Impressive
as it may have been as a feat of construction, the new Ministry was scarcely
comparable in intent to Speer’s plans to redraw the capital’s street plan as Ger-
mania. The building’s footprint respected the existing street layout, so that the
district retained its original contours, and this applied not only to the site’s
external perimeter. As Sagebiel himself made clear, preservation of the long-
standing green space on the Ministry site was a decisive factor in his design:
“My starting point in the planning process was to retain as fully as possible the
attractive park and its mature stock of trees” (ES, 73). Sagebiel also adhered
rigidly to a maximum height of five stories on the street-facing elevations,
partly to maximize light in the park and also in the building’s internal court-
yards. But these restrictions also ensured that the new building matched the
height of the complex of buildings that it replaced, the Prussian War Ministry.
Dating originally from the mid-1840s and designed by August Stüler, a pupil
of Karl Friedrich Schinkel, the original War Ministry building had been con-
structed on Leipziger Straße. Further acquisitions and rebuilding in the late
nineteenth century extended the building so that a relatively uniform five-story
structure, of a subdued neoclassicist style, stretched down to the southernmost
end of the new Ministry site. In this sense Sagebiel’s Aviation Ministry actu-
ally embodied significant strands of continuity, not only in function and foot-
print but also to some extent in style. Indeed, it seems that Sagebiel used Edu-
ard Jobst Siebler’s extension to the Reich Chancellery, completed in 1931, as a
model for integrating a new administrative building into its existing architec-
tural environment. In fact, Sagebiel’s plans had made provision to retain and
integrate the original War Ministry building on Leipziger Straße, before struc-
tural concerns led to its demolition. Rather than a wholly new text, the Nazi-

era Ministry can easily be read as a contemporary rewording of the existing and well-established language of a site that had served an official administrative function for more than a century.

While the eventual demolition of the Prussian Ministry building constituted the final erasure of previous material traces at the site, the new materiality of the Ministry building entailed another form of diachronic layering. As Sagebiel’s account of the design and building process makes clear, the speed of construction was facilitated by the functionality of his axis design, which mapped the building’s various sections onto a regular grid system: “In the detailed floor plan, clarity and efficiency were decisive in the arrangement of corridors, staircases and elevators. In addition, an axis system was chosen which made it possible to foresee the final distribution of space and the division of floors already during the construction phase” (ES, 74). This three-by-six-meter grid was realized in the building’s reinforced concrete skeleton, supplemented in places by a steel superstructure and onto which the limestone facade was then attached. Again, efficiency of design was paramount in the choice of stone, which was delivered in thin slabs, prefabricated in a limited number of sizes by as many as fifty companies from around Germany. In this sense, the timeless and traditional stone demanded in the official rhetoric of cultural policy was simply a veneer, superimposed onto the building’s underlying functionality and modernity. Even contemporary accounts conceded that the facade’s superficiality was an essential property of the building: “The load-bearing frame of the building may have disappeared behind these forceful outer walls, but they remain clearly recognizable as dressing and, in their flat surfaces, make an effective contrast to the window surrounds” (HH, 426).

One is reminded here of Andrew Webber’s “chronotopical” exploration of Berlin in which he identifies stone as the dominant topos of the National Socialist era and the regime’s “topographical fantasy” to see the city “set in stone.”10 For Webber, the city is a site of paradox where counterspaces constantly undermine the dominant topography, and the pattern that emerges from his study is of “forms of cover image that conceal, and are subverted by, contradictory currents.”11 Nowhere is this more aptly exemplified than in the sandstone from which much of the city has been constructed, its gradual erosion a reminder that the apparently most durable of materials reveal the

11. Ibid., 24.
city’s foundations of sand. Sagebiel’s choice of limestone can be understood as a self-conscious attempt to escape that fragility and to replace it with a sense of durability appropriate to the ideological claims of National Socialism, but its application as a superficial “cover image” to mask the thoroughly modern fundamentals of the building provides a paradox comparable to that of Berlin’s “sandstone.” Indeed, the limestone veneer of the Aviation Ministry acts as a metonym for a building where tradition and modernity combine to unsettling effect. Brian Ladd observes that there is a notable parallel with Sagebiel’s most famous project, Berlin’s Tempelhof Airport, as the Ministry building’s “external appearance is modern in its stark and massive facades but traditional in its stone construction and monumental entrance courts.”

12 Internally, too, this tension characterizes the building’s design: the light and elegant modernity of the aluminum balustrades, for example, exists in an uneasy tension with the cold and heavy stonework of the staircases themselves. These contrasting materialities and temporalities are symptomatic of the wider relationship between fascism and modernism, where, as Mark Antliff argues, the national(ist) appropriation of an international aesthetic code can also be understood as an attempt to assert an organic notion of time against the mechanical chronology of Taylorist rationalism. The emphatically German, limestone modernism of the Ministry building can then be viewed as part of a geographically specific mode of modernism that “gained rhetorical power with the emergence of fascism, where it played an important role . . . in the subsuming of technocratic forms of industrial organization under the umbrella of organicist social and temporal orders.”

13 Significantly, this temporal and material layering did not go unacknowledged in contemporary analyses of the Ministry building, which sought to reconcile these potentially conflicting elements. On the one hand, the building’s functionality and modernity were openly celebrated. The short report in Monatshefte für Baukunst in March 1936 stressed above all the building’s technical achievement, the impetus that had “harnessed technology in a carefully planned and disciplined way to create an impressive structural achievement” (VB, 83). Hoffmann made a similar point, claiming that “in this kind of construction project the leadership of the Reich has made use of every available technological means to . . . improve the functional value of the building” (HH, 425). For Paulsen, the building’s proportions and its regular rows of win-

dows were characterized by a clarity of design that was only fitting for its function. In the process he invoked one of the bywords of Weimar modernism: “This functionality [Sachlichkeit] corresponds to the purpose of a very large administrative building with numerous offices” (FP, 84). On the other hand, all three accounts sought to integrate this technocratic dimension of the building’s design with nationalist and traditionalist discourses. In its internal fittings, for example, the building was claimed to be filled with “the breath of modernity,” but its external face was viewed as preserving “Prussian representation” (VB, 83). For Hoffmann, meanwhile, the technological methods of the construction process and its rationalist planning constituted only the foundation from which the building would elevate itself to “beauty and honor” (HH, 425). While the aesthetic value of industrial construction might derive solely from the technological, a representative building of state had to adhere to what were considered “eternal laws” (HH, 425). These included proportion, balance, and the use of stone. However, Paulsen’s account expressed these tensions between tradition and modernity most acutely. Here the potential incongruity of the Sachlichkeit that had come to embody the metropolis of Weimar-era Berlin had to be acknowledged and an attempt made to appropriate the term for the new political circumstances: “Sachlichkeit used to be a slogan. . . . Here Sachlichkeit means something fundamentally different” (FP, 84).

Given Sagebiel’s own training and background the functional modernism of the Ministry building is hardly surprising.14 Having occupied senior positions in the architectural offices of Jacob Koerfer in Cologne (1924–28) and then Erich Mendelsohn in Berlin (1929–32), Sagebiel had worked on various retail and office building projects in the modern, sachlich style. Under Koerfer, these included the Deutschlandhaus in Essen (1928–29), the Europahaus in Düsseldorf (1928), and the Hansahaus in Cologne (1924–25), at that time the tallest office block in Europe. Under Mendelsohn, Sagebiel’s most significant role had been as project manager for the Colombushaus, the nine-story office and retail block built in steel and glass on Potsdamer Platz between 1930 and 1932.15 Clearly, Sagebiel made use of this experience in his design and management of the Aviation Ministry building. As Elke Dittrich observes of that project, “It seems as if Sagebiel took as his model the subdued modernism of government and office buildings of the late 1920s.”16 Most striking in

14. For a full account, see Dittrich, Ernst Sagebiel, 30–50.
16. Dittrich, Ernst Sagebiel, 142.
this context is the similarity between the rear, garden-facing elevation of the Ministry building, with its four regular rectangular wings, and the six protruding wings of Hans Poelzig’s IG Farben Haus in Frankfurt, the design of which Sagebiel had studied through his work in Koerfer’s office. Indeed, the clarity and regularity of Poelzig’s design, its monumental scale, and its dressed stone facade make the building a clear forerunner of the Aviation Ministry building. Such modernist influences in the style of the Ministry building were certainly not lost on Speer, who would later denounce the building as “third-rate” while alluding to Sagebiel’s affinity with Mendelsohn. In this context it may also be significant that the ceremonial courtyard on Wilhelmstraße was one of a number of late revisions to Sagebiel’s design that brought it closer to the more conservative official style defined by Troost and Speer. Although unproved, evidence suggests that these changes stemmed from direct intervention on the part of Adolf Hitler and Hermann Göring in response to what had been perceived to be too stark and functional a design.

In this sense we might usefully conceive of the Ministry building as a palimpsest in an extended sense, representative of the cultural-historical traces that persist across the political rupture of 1933 and, in particular, of the longer-term continuities of cultural and social modernism out of which National Socialism originated and onto which it imposed itself. Certainly, literary and art history have shown clearly that the National Socialist period did not witness the complete erasure of the *neue Sachlichkeit* of the 1920s, despite a renewed prominence for more restorative and inward-looking styles and discourses in the 1930s. More broadly, and as a wealth of recent research has argued, it takes only a slight shift in perspective to see fascism as one element in the complex and fluctuating nexus of modernism, rather than as its static and antagonistic counterpoint. As Antliff suggests, fascism can no longer be treated “as an aesthetic aberration in the modernist march toward abstraction” but has to be seen as a fluid and plural entity that often intersected with other currents of modernism. Only in this context, for example, can we explain the presence in April 1937 of a series of photographs of recent technological design projects in

17. Ibid. Koerfer entered a design in the competition, which was won by Poelzig.
the most programmatically titled of all manifestations of the apparently deeply conservative and inward-looking aesthetics of National Socialist Germany, the literary journal *Das innere Reich*. Alongside plates showing newly constructed motorways and Speer’s Zeppelin field in Nuremburg, and amid its usual range of nature poetry and conservative literary criticism, the journal published a photograph of Sagebiel’s Aviation Ministry. For the reader, this seems a surprising juxtaposition, but it is strangely appropriate for a building that, as I have shown, embodies the profound cultural-historical tensions of the period. If the broad thesis of a “Nazi modernism” now enjoys a widespread scholarly consensus, then it is apparently paradoxical labels such as Brandon Taylor and Wilfried van der Will’s “modernist antimodernism” or Jeffrey Herf’s “reactionary modernism” that perhaps best capture these often contradictory layers in the cultural project of German fascism. Indeed, as Roger Griffin argues, this paradoxical temporality is built into the mythic core of an ideology that mobilized backward-looking myths in the name of future-oriented rebirth—a “nostalgia for the future,” to use the highly suggestive neofascist slogan cited by Griffin. Aply characterized by Dittrich as “a form of modernism enhanced with historicist decoration,” the palimpsest design of Sagebiel’s Aviation Ministry building embodies these same contradictory layers.

1950–1953: A New Beginning amid the Ambivalences of the Past

Although badly damaged, the Ministry building was quickly identified by occupying Soviet forces as an essential resource in their postwar administrative infrastructure. By August 1945 sixty-seven offices in the building were already in use, and in the same month an order was issued to ensure that five hundred offices were made ready in the next three months. Half a million reichsmarks was earmarked for that purpose by the municipal authorities, and about eighteen hundred construction workers were employed on the site. The pragmatic adoption of the building by the Soviet authorities was accompanied


by the complete erasure of the overt iconography of National Socialism, as bare stone replaced the nationalist and militaristic reliefs. According to at least one prominent eyewitness, Willi Stoph, the future GDR head of state, the building’s new administrative purpose under the German Communist Party would in itself be sufficient to counteract its history. As he put it: “From now on the hundreds of offices will be occupied by people who are working for peaceful reconstruction and who will be making their contribution to overcoming the grave consequences for our country of Nazi war and aggression.”

Identified in June 1947 as the home for the Deutsche Wirtschaftskommission, effectively the central Soviet administration for East Germany, the former Aviation Ministry and its surrounding complex of buildings emerged as the natural governmental center for the newly formed GDR after October 1949. Responsibility for the building, now known as the House of Ministries, was passed in June 1950 to the Ministry for Reconstruction, and it was at this time that the first plans were drawn up for a more overt ideological statement to be written onto the site.

After initially abortive attempts to commission a mural for the north colonnade at the beginning of the year, six artists were invited in August 1950 to submit designs for a mosaic to fill the space previously occupied by Waldschmidt’s Nazi-era relief. The theme chosen for the design was couched in the inimitable jargon of East German socialism: “The meaning of freedom for the cultural development of humanity and the necessity of struggle on its behalf.”

When the competition jury met on November 6, 1950, four of the five entries were deemed not to have fulfilled the requirements of the brief. Lacking in ideological clarity, insufficiently positive in their depiction, or overly schematic and fragmented in form, these designs were rejected in favor of the entry submitted by Max Lingner, a founding member of the newly established East Berlin Academy of Arts. Lingner’s draft portraying figures and groups from representative sections of society was seen to have synthesized the individual and the collective and to have successfully depicted the full range of social activity in the early GDR. After a further lengthy process of composition and realization, Lingner’s mural was unveiled on January 3, 1953, to coincide with the


27. In German: “Die Bedeutung des Friedens für die kulturelle Entwicklung der Menschheit und die Notwendigkeit des kämpferischen Einsatzes für ihn.”

birthday of the GDR’s president, Wilhelm Pieck. In addition to the ceremonial unveiling, the event’s significance was marked by widespread press coverage and by a forty-five-page commemorative booklet written by Gerhard Strauß of the Deutsche Bauakademie and published by the Academy of Arts. Strongly reminiscent of the official claims made by the National Socialist regime on behalf of the building itself, Strauß’s text granted particular importance to the site’s location: “In the heart of Germany’s capital city, where people from the East and West of our fatherland meet on a daily basis, it is right that art should make a monumental statement to announce the nature of our work.”

Indeed, as had been the case for Sagebiel’s original design in the mid-1930s, strong rhetorical claims were made on behalf of the mural project as the marker of a break with the past and of the initiation of a new cultural era. Otto Grotewohl, the minister president who had worked with Lingner on the project, was particularly keen to stress this dimension, celebrating “Max Lingner’s outstanding achievement, which consists in his exemplary representation of the typical content of our lives.” In a similar vein, one press report praised Lingner for having found “a wonderful, imposing, and radiant visual language for our new way of life and for the new people of our time.” And in the detail of its composition (fig. 1), the mural carried a representative value appropriate to this purpose. At the center stood a trio of figures representing the alliance between the working classes, the peasantry, and the intelligentsia. At the extreme right Lingner had positioned a couple and their young child, and at the extreme left a member of the GDR parliament. In between these figures were ranged, on the left, members of the state’s mass organizations marching under the banner of socialism and, on the right, industrial and agricultural workers directly involved in production. Significantly, this latter part of the composition included ongoing construction projects in Berlin, such as the Walter Ulbricht Stadium and the new housing blocks on Stalinallee. In this way, the utopian image of reconstruction written onto the Ministry building was intended to represent and inspire the wholesale renewal of Berlin’s ruined urban fabric. In Strauß’s words: “Faced with this image, the imagination of the viewer races ahead and can see the currently empty spaces around the House of Ministries filled with towering buildings. We feel part of this difficult but

joyous construction work." This was the unmistakable optimistic language of Socialist Realism superimposed onto the material surface left behind by National Socialism. Not that there was space in the official rhetoric for the legacy of the past. Grotewohl’s verdict was unequivocal: “Lingner’s creation is a reflection of our time, a reflection of ourselves.”

The new era marked by the mural project was not only expressed in its content. This function also extended to the process by which the project had been realized, a collaborative and inclusive process that was seen to offer a new model for art and that contrasted starkly with the perceived isolation and corruption of Western bourgeois art. As Lingner himself observed, the genesis of the work reflected “the completely new nature of the relationship between society and the artist in our new state.” In particular, official accounts stressed the close and productive cooperation between artist and state, which was embodied by the nine-month collaboration between Lingner and Grotewohl on the mural’s design. Much was made of Grotewohl’s role as a tireless and constructive adviser to Lingner, and photographs of the two working together featured prominently in both newspaper articles and in Strauß’s book. The full title of that publication stressed the exemplary status afforded to the cooperative process, and this was further emphasized in the text: “The finished picture at the House of Ministries is the result of this communal work between the client and the artist which is borne by our new spirit. That the ethical and aesthetic qualities of the work have been successfully synthesized confirms that

34. Ibid.
the path we have taken is the right one.” The mural as genre also had a pro-
grammatic role to play in this ideological narrative, as a form of art appropri-
ate to broad social themes and accessible to the widest possible public. The
scale of mural composition necessarily involved more than just a single artist
in its realization, and this was reinforced by Lingner’s decision to transfer his
original design onto about two thousand small porcelain tiles manufactured by
Meißen. Not only did this last dimension of the project necessitate the direct
involvement of industrial workers in artistic production, but it also entailed the
development of new manufacturing processes that official accounts claimed
had revolutionary significance for the ceramics industry: “Numerous experi-
ments eventually led to the discovery of an entirely new process which, hith-
erto, had been considered technologically impossible. . . . Here we see that our
new relationship with labor leads to innovations for which we have to thank the
creative energy of our workforce.”

However, just as had been the case in the National Socialist period, the
cultural-historical layering of the Ministry site ensured that these ideological
claims were not fully realized. This was felt most acutely in the physical
encounter between the two cultural-political texts (fig. 2), where the GDR
mural was written onto the existing Nazi-era architectural surface. In contrast
to Lingner’s previous large-scale public composition at the Berlin Lustgarten
in May 1950, this mural did not occupy a central and highly visible position on
the Ministry building. Rather, the entrance in the north colonnade on Leipziger
Straße was displaced as the focal point of the building by the ceremonial

35. Strauß, Vom Auftrag zum Wandbild, 7–8.
36. Ibid., 34–36.
courtyard on Wilhelmstraße, so that it occupied a marginal and decentered position in the building’s final symmetry. Neither fully external nor fully internal, neither fully private nor fully public, an entrance without official status, the colonnade functions as one of the liminal “between-spaces” that Webber sees as another characteristic of Berlin’s cultural topography. In this case that allowed the scale and weight of the Nazi-era architecture to overpower Lingner’s new socialist-realist text, and this was not lost on contemporary observers. For some, the mural’s bright colors made a favorable contrast to the Ministry’s gray facade, and this was clearly an intrinsic element in the intended ideological appropriation of the site. For others, though, that same contrast

38. This is first hinted at in *Neues Deutschland* two weeks after the mural’s unveiling, where reference is made to the building’s “Nazi parade-ground style.” See Hermann Müller, “Ein Wandbild von Prof. Max Lingner,” *Neues Deutschland*, January 20, 1953. By the beginning of February 1953 a discussion had been initiated in *Sonntag*, in which a number of voices started to question the suitability of the Ministry colonnade as the location for the mural. See “Diskussion über das Wandbild von Max Lingner,” *Sonntag*, February 1 and 8, 1953.
produced a troubling disjunction, as the cover image appeared superficial and out of place. As one correspondent put it: “The effect is that of a poster stuck onto a gray expanse. It appears on the stone as a bright foreign body.”\(^{39}\) This view was shared by Hanns Hopp, a member of the commissioning jury who now bemoaned a failure to integrate Lingner’s design fully with the architecture around it.\(^ {40}\) Not only did the columns break up the long, horizontal composition, but the mural gave the impression of being merely a temporary and artificial addition, insufficiently synthesized with the building around it. Hopp’s solution was a stone frame around the mural that would bind it into the building, a suggestion that Lingner himself had already taken up in correspondence with Grotewohl.\(^ {41}\) Lingner wrote that the mural had “no real connection with the architecture.” It felt like a “news-sheet attached to the wall.” Lingner proposed the addition not only of an architrave around the mural but also of ornamental surfaces at either side, depicting in monochrome mosaics the emblems of the GDR, the block parties, and mass organizations such as the Freie Deutsche Jugend (Free German Youth). That initiative, strikingly reminiscent of the recent attempts to add ideological signification to Rüppel’s memorial, came to nothing, and Lingner’s dissatisfaction with the final result of his work remained. At least in part he attributed this to the mural’s unsuitable location: “And yet the result satisfied neither one party nor the other. Whether it was because the deadline for completion was short . . . , or because the mural was not in its right place, or because that space was altogether unsuited to the mural.”\(^ {42}\)

In addition to the material traces of the Nazi past that impinged on the process of rewriting intended through the mural project, the cultural-historical traces of Lingner’s own artistic biography acted as a significant obstacle to official attempts to impose a new aesthetic narrative at the Ministry site. Strongly influenced by the expressionist sculptor Käthe Kollwitz, Lingner had moved in 1928 to Paris, where he made his name as an illustrator for *Le monde* and *L’humanité*. While there was no doubting his ideological conviction or his commitment to the construction of socialism in the GDR, his often highly

\(^{39}\) Lothar Rasmuss, reader’s letter in response to *Sonntag*, January 25, 1953, Max Lingner Archive, IV, C 526.


\(^{41}\) Lingner to Otto Grotewohl, January 19, 1953, Max Lingner Archive, IV, C 528.

stylized figurative art left him vulnerable to charges of “Western” influence. Already in January 1951 he had been singled out in an article in Tägliche Rundschau as a “formalist” artist whose human figures were too “schematic.” Lingner responded with his own article in which he warned against discouraging criticism and in which he asked for understanding for the differing “baggage” that artists brought with them to the GDR. But it is not true, as some art historians have maintained, that Lingner rejected the charges of formalism made against him. Having been invited by Walter Ulbricht in March 1951 to comment on the Central Committee Conference draft resolution, which would officially launch the formalism campaign against nonorthodox artists, Lingner drew up a response in which he acknowledged that the charges against him had been justified. In the same document he identified the mural project as an opportunity to work with the party and state to overcome these difficulties, but the reality was that these tensions significantly hampered the collaborative process for which such strong ideological claims were being made. The arduous process by which Lingner’s work was subjected to detailed and unrelenting criticism clearly took its toll, a product of the “paternalism and paranoia” that characterized the mentality of SED cultural officials. Lingner’s own papers suggest that after the competition jury accepted his initial draft, he completed as many as eighteen new versions of the mural design. Sixteen months after he had been awarded the commission and a year after he had begun work with Grotewohl, Lingner’s tone had grown distinctly weary. In a letter to Grotewohl he declared himself physically defeated: “Dear Otto, when you train a racehorse to its peak condition, lead it to the start line, fire the starting gun, and then take it back and leave it standing, the horse is no use to anyone after a while.”

For all this, initial reception of Lingner’s mural was favorable, largely because of Gerhard Strauß’s sympathetic interpretation, whose influence is
readily visible in many contemporary press reports. Strauß was clear that the mural project had helped Lingner, and through him German visual art more generally, to escape the perils of nonrealist aesthetics: “In a monumental way the mural has promoted and supported a path out of formalism, toward a new attitude that is imbued with life, serves the people, and is bound together with the nation.”48 However, shaped by the ongoing formalism campaign—or “Hans Lauter’s hard and unsympathetic party reprimand,” as Lingner had put it in his letter to Grotewohl—the discussion of the mural in early 1953 grew increasingly critical.49 Indeed, it was Lingner’s misfortune that the project’s composition and reception coincided with the most severe and dogmatic phase in the implementation of early GDR cultural policy, when even the most ideologically committed GDR intellectuals, such as Bertolt Brecht and Hanns Eisler, found themselves attacked for the modernist aesthetics that were perceived to persist from the Weimar era and from their exile in the West. While many readers’ letters about the finished project remained positive, almost all raised concerns about the unnatural representation of the figures in the mural. The most significant criticism of this type came in Müller’s article in Neues Deutschland. Lingner had failed to evade the danger in this kind of composition, where “living and realistic representation is hampered by an eclectic composition and arrangement, which results in an unintended fall into abstraction or poor allegory.”50 The central trio of figures, for example, appeared stiff, wooden, and unconvincing, a weakness “caused above all by the schematic depiction of the human figures.” Referring to Lingner’s many past works afflicted by this schematic style, Müller observed that “the will to break with these vestiges of formalism has not been energetic enough.” Despite Lingner’s hopes to the contrary, the mural project and its reception could not escape the traces of his own artistic biography.

**Dictatorship and Its Multiple Temporalities**

What is striking about the preceding palimpsest reading of the Aviation Ministry building are the strong parallels that emerge at these two very different cultural-political moments. On the one hand, comparable claims were made for a heavily ideologized appropriation of the site through a monumental and future-oriented aesthetic that expressed forcefully a sense of rupture and new

49. Lingner to Grotewohl, May 5, 1952.
50. Müller, “Ein Wandbild von Prof. Max Lingner.”
beginning. These are the “present futures” that Huyssen identifies as the energizing force in the modernist culture of the early twentieth century, not only in avant-garde aesthetic modernisms but also in National Socialist and Stalinist “totalitarianisms.”

51 Notably, these present futures incorporated in both cases the rhetorical appropriation of technological modernity and innovation: in the case of National Socialism, the modern design and realization of Sagebiel’s project; in the case of the GDR, the representation of industrial advance in the composition of Lingner’s mural and the manufacturing innovations made in the execution of the project by Meißen. On the other hand, persistent and legible traces of the cultural-historical past interfered in both cases with these cultural-political claims. These “present pasts,” to use Huyssen’s terminology once more, were largely suppressed in the official narratives, but they reveal themselves at each of these moments of attempted cultural-political rewriting.

As a result, the Ministry building becomes a site where these two conflicting temporalities meet and are negotiated with one another. At its most direct, this occurs in the immediate physical encounter between the successive cultural-political presents written onto the site. In the mid-1930s these were the preceding and surrounding architectural principles of the district, to which Sagebiel’s design made considerable concessions, for all the rhetorical claims to the contrary. In the early 1950s this was the architecture of National Socialism that overwhelmed and physically interrupted the new text of Lingner’s mural in the north colonnade. In both cases, this is also a meeting between the new cultural-political prescriptions of the regimes and the prior artistic biographies of the protagonists: for Sagebiel, the functional modernism of the successful projects he directed with Koerfer and Mendelsohn; for Lingner, the schematic figurative style with which he had made his name in Paris throughout the 1930s. Finally, the building becomes the focus for an encounter between wider discourses of tradition and modernity that often generated profound ambivalences in the official narratives of the regimes themselves. In particular, insistent claims for modernity were often interwoven with more conservative complexes of ideas, especially in the aesthetic realm where officially promoted neoclassicism and socialist realism represented more restorative, albeit ambiguous, impulses. In the case of Lingner’s work, the claims made for the mural as a progressive aesthetic form are undermined by the ambivalences of mural

art that, as Remy Golan has shown, was appropriated at this time by proponents of both modernism and tradition. Paradoxically, the technological advances in the production process, which for the first time fixed a full palette of matte colors against the effects of the northern European climate, made possible the permanence and individual creativity of the work, thereby reinforcing conventional principles of bourgeois, auratic art. More generally, claims for industrial and technological advance in the GDR were difficult to reconcile with the lags in modernization readily apparent in reality, not least in the mural’s anachronistic representation of production. The result is a highly complex coexistence of differing and often conflicting temporalities, centered on a single cultural site.

This is what I have termed the cultural-political palimpsest, a particular form of palimpsestuous structure that arises because of the very self-conscious ideological writing undertaken in the conditions of dictatorship. Notably, this structure characterizes several other similar sites, above all in Berlin. The building that currently houses the Federal Foreign Ministry, for example, was originally designed by Heinrich Wolff as the Nazi-era Reichsbank before serving in the GDR as the meeting place of the SED Central Committee. On the city’s west side, Sagebiel’s Tempelhof Airport and Werner March’s Olympic Stadium are two further buildings whose origins lie in the Third Reich and that not only survived after 1945 but also enjoyed unbroken use during the Federal Republic and beyond. In the former case, the writing of an alternative Cold War narrative onto the site, that of the “democratic” and “antitotalitarian” air bridge of 1948–49, is a particular feature of its palimpsest history. Widening the parameters, the Aviation Ministry’s most obvious antecedent, Poelzig’s IG Farben Haus, offers another fascinating case study of the cultural-political palimpsest. Indelibly linked through IG Farben with National Socialism and the Holocaust, the building became the headquarters for Allied forces after 1945 before serving as the administrative base in Europe for US forces and for the CIA in Germany. After abortive attempts to use the building as the site for the new European Central Bank in the 1990s, the site was acquired for the University of Frankfurt, which continues to occupy the building and develop the surrounding land. Farther afield, the cultural legacy of Italian fascism includes such multilayered sites as Giuseppe Terragni’s Casa del Fascio in

Como (now the headquarters for a branch of the state police), the Foro Italico in Rome (including the Olympic Stadium and the modernist-classicist Palazzo della Farnesina, which currently houses the Italian Foreign Ministry), and the remarkable modernist architecture of Asmara, Benito Mussolini’s colonial outpost in Eritrea. What all these buildings share is a modern functionality that, as in the case of the Aviation Ministry, acts as an underlying strand of continuity beneath successive cultural-historical appropriations. And despite concerted attempts to erase preceding ideological narratives, the sites retain traces of numerous previous texts, multiple temporalities now interwoven into these paradigmatic palimpsestuous structures.

These structures are not, however, confined to the highly charged cultural-political contexts of dictatorship. In recent years, the urban palimpsest has become commonplace in a wide range of scholarly disciplines and has been applied to a host of different city contexts, while contemporary architectural debates are ritually configured around the appropriateness, or inappropriateness, of innovative building in traditional environments. To return to Berlin and the case of the Aviation Ministry, the ambivalence in the materiality of Sagebiel’s design finds a remarkable echo in the most recent debates over the rebuilding of Berlin. As Huyssen has pointed out, when the advocates of “critical reconstruction” prescribe building in stone, they are propagating an illusion. “Building in stone, indeed,” Huyssen asks skeptically, “at a time when the most stone you’d get is a thin veneer covering the concrete skeleton underneath.” More than half a century earlier one could have said the same of Sagebiel’s design, caught in a comparable tension between its underlying modernity and a cover image of traditionalism. Moreover, when Huyssen defines the credo of Berlin’s modern-day architectural traditionalists as a mixture of Schinkel’s classicism and Peter Behrens’s modernism, he is correct to highlight the repression of the city’s surviving Nazi architecture from this vision. What Huyssen does not point out, though, is the significance of the Aviation Ministry as a missing link in that line of stylistic con-

53. For the last of these, see Stefan Boness, Asmara: The Frozen City (Berlin: Jovis, 2006).
tinuity. And if that seems a provocative suggestion, then it only underlines the misleading exclusion of Nazi-era architecture from the “normal” cultural continuities of twentieth-century modernity. One of the great attractions of the palimpsest metaphor in this context is its insistence on the reality of present pasts (on cultural overlap, transition, and simultaneity) at the expense of the present futures (erasure, rupture, and new beginning) proclaimed in the regimes’ official rhetoric.

In this sense the palimpsest figure brings the cultural practice of dictatorship into the wider process of cultural-historical development from which it is so often excluded. Invoking Michel Foucault, Dillon reads these historical processes as inherently palimpsestuous, demanding in response a genealogical reading that does not unravel the layers of the palimpsest to uncover its original text but that acknowledges and explores the multiple texts which inhabit the surface fabric. For Dillon, this is a radical undertaking mobilized from the standpoint of contemporary postcolonial theory. From that perspective the palimpsest “represents history not as natural evolution or progress but as . . . the violent erasure and superimposition of cultures” and as “defiant and subversive persistence.” For all the differences between the colonial context and that of dictatorship, we recognize here the acts of erasure and imposition inherent in the claims of dictatorial regimes, especially during their intense “totalitarian” phases. By the same token, to read the architectural text of dictatorship as palimpsest is also to read the subversive persistence that obstructs those “total” claims, the inherent “unlawfulness” or “perversity” that Gérard Genette sees as the hallmark of palimpsestuous writing. As David Bathrick has observed of the GDR, a discourse-theoretical approach to the politics of culture can reveal the polysemic modes of address that challenged, often unintentionally, the monosemic claims made in the regime’s official narratives. A palimpsestuous analysis of the Aviation Ministry building in Berlin exposes similar ambiguities and blockages. Indeed, the profoundly ambivalent attempts

56. Notably, Behrens was chosen by Allgemeine Elektricitäts-Gesellschaft to design a new administrative headquarters in Berlin in the Nazi period. In his memoirs Albert Speer recalled that Alfred Rosenberg’s objections to Behrens were overruled by Hitler, who apparently admired Behrens’s German embassy building in Saint Petersburg. That building, too, bears more than a passing resemblance to Sagebiel’s Aviation Ministry. See Speer, Erinnerungen (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1969), 159.

57. Dillon, “Reinscribing De Quincey’s Palimpsest,” 254.


in contemporary National Socialist accounts to reconcile Sagebiel’s functional modernism with more traditionalist aesthetic discourses and the troubled composition and reception of Lingner’s mural both show that contemporaries understood only too well that these new cultural texts had to be read amid the still legible traces of their predecessors. As such, an appreciation of the complex web of historical markers that characterize Berlin as palimpsest is as vital to our understanding of the city’s “totalitarian” past as it is to our grasp of its postmodern present.