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Representing home? City Museums and Concepts of Identity

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Abstract

Migration and mobility have always been part of societies, long before our modern notion of globalisation developed. Alongside this constant dynamic, a sense of ‚home' and identification with the tangible and intangible characteristics of this specific place always played a major role in cultural self-reassurance. Especially the German concept of ‚Heimat' was defined by regional, even national identity, closely linked to tradition, heritage and a sense of belonging that mostly excluded foreigners. Now that significant international and domestic migration puts this rooted form of collective identity to the test, how do city museums, nucleuses of public memory discourse and therefore powerful memory institutions, meet the challenge of providing identification points to visitors with diverse backgrounds? Based upon the assumption that identity is not ready-made, but rather the outcome of a dialogical, participative process, I regard city museums as burning glasses of urban identity, as materialized belonging within social, physical and historical structures. How does the interaction between (non-) local visitors and the city museum as a retainer of heterogenic regional memory produce collective, and therefore also individual identity? My approach to this issue leads me to the concept of mental maps used to describe regional identity and the question whether it is tantamount with what we call ‚home'. The Actor Network Theory (ANT) provides access to examining the complex interlacing of individuals, artefacts and institutions relevant to answering the question how city museums help create identity and a sense of belonging within a diverse, rapidly changing society, where the need of belongingness never lost any of its importance.

This paper reflects work in progress for my doctoral thesis.

Key words: identity, city culture, museums, belonging

German 'Heimat' between tradition and redefinition

'Home' is a word with as many meanings as there are people using it, and its denotation varies from language to language. It is closely linked to a country's culture and history, one of the most prominent examples being the German '*Heimat*', which translates to 'home' or 'homeland'. Giving an exact definition of the word is almost impossible. If one were to ask ten Germans what they believed *Heimat* was, the answers would range from "*Heimat* is where I was born and raised" to "*Heimat* is an idea, a sense of belonging" or simply "*Heimat* is where I find the light switches in the dark". And indeed, the German word *Heimat*, which cannot be translated without losing much of its connotation, describes more than a place or a feeling; it may also include the emptiness of being driven out of one's home and not finding a new one anywhere else.

Over the centuries, *Heimat* has changed its meaning more than once and in the way we understand it today, it is a product of modernity - which may seem anachronistic. While *Heimat* was closely connected to personal property, citizenship, rights and duties for hundreds of years, it turned into a romantic utopia after the German revolution of 1848 failed. *Heimat* thereby lost much of its local reference and became an idea, a feeling and an idealised place. With the dawning of the German Empire, *Heimat* was soon closely linked to the nation instead of an individual place and it remained this way until after the Second World War [GEBHARDT et al. 1995, 5]. In a way, this concept was both conservative and progressive, trying to compensate the growing complexity and problematic developments of an increasingly complicated world with traditional, ideal characteristics of an intact, better world. It did not only point out questionable progression, but offered solutions as a form of retreat and compensation [KÖSTLIN 2010, 27]. The movement for the protection of historical monuments in Germany for example is closely linked to this version of *Heimat*. Being understood as the active safeguarding of an endangered world, the aforementioned context has since been fought over by left and right wing activists. Some deem it a nationalist relict, for some it is the core of their identity. The traditional concept of *Heimat* as an idealised reality, a retreat from the threats of globalisation and destruction of history is often connected to a backward denotation, and seemingly clashes with the contemporary world. In this context, German writer Martin Walser once referred to *Heimat* as the "most beautiful word for backwardness" [WALSER 1968, 40]. *Heimat* here is regarded as something surreal, existing only in memories as the ideal reflection of a deficient reality. While this interpretation prevailed – also due to the abuse of the word in a nationalistic sense until 1945 – for several years, the discussion around it never died down. Globalisation and the feeling of missing or neglected roots undeniably produced a *Heimat* renaissance in the public, but also the scientific discourse. Since the first peak of this renaissance in the 1970s, research focused on the many facets of *Heimat*. It was understood as not necessarily linked to one single and specific place, but capable of expanding to a regional and even transnational sense of belonging with a spatial and cultural component, which also put the concept of people with multiple places of living and multicultural backgrounds as 'home-less' into question [BAUSINGER 1990, 198-199]. *Heimat* acts as a category of manageable simplicity within a pluralistic culture, thus enabling its actors to

communicate within a common frame, using symbols and sharing certain values that equip them with the basis to form an identity. This process is not a passive one, as in taking on a handed down, pre-manufactured narrative, but building identity based on *Heimat* as a socio-cultural frame of sorts is always an active process, carried out by the individual interacting with its surroundings and positioning itself accordingly [GEBHARDT et al. 1990, 6]. In order to not lose sense of direction within pluralistic societies, individuals resort to their very own specific symbolic frame, which is rooted in their everyday interactions [KÖSTLIN 2010, 36]. The world itself is broken down into a more manageable reality presenting itself in architecture, landscape, social contacts, language and values. In the process of building identity, an individual will take subjectified memories, which are self-produced, and combine them with objectified memories, which are available in the shape of stories, monuments, cultural artefacts and anything else acting as an agent within the collective memory [CHRISTMANN 2006, 601]. All of these are attributed with meaning in the process of creating identity, thereby structuring the tangible as well as intangible environment and enabling the individual to develop its own matrix for interaction. This grid or matrix as a key to the world is established from an individual's environment. While this environment can be the same for many inhabitants, the attribution of meaning is an individual process. This means that *Heimat*, or better: belonging (again, the German word *Beheimatung* as the act of having or creating a home is untranslatable) is a process of creation with certain requirements, but no defined result. It leads to the construction of plural identity levels, such as individual as well as collective identity, and therefore I understand and use the concept of *Heimat* as the merger of spatial, social and cultural identification in its personal and collective dimensions.

The attribution of meaning to characteristics of our surroundings inevitably leads to certain characteristics being connected with memories and emotions by more than one individual. Generally, these artefacts take up a special place within a society's culture and collective identity, the more memories, ideas, ideals and values encase them. These artefacts are predestined to act as representations of a society's identity, as they are materialised culture, and as such often find their place in museums. In this context, a second very German phenomenon linked to *Heimat* provides the connection between the individual process of creating *Heimat* on one side, and the institutionalised representation of this highly personal matter on the other side: the *Heimatmuseum*. These museums are not a homogeneous category within the museum classification. Instead, they can vary in size and shape. Heimatmuseums are a German specialty, dating back to the 19th century with two peaks during the 1970s and one happening just now, linked to the renaissances of *Heimat* itself. They range from very small houses or historic buildings such as village schools or old town halls, run by volunteers or semi-professionals, to larger museums that sometimes combine the display of a places' history with a second subject – for example industry, technology or clothing. As is the case with *Heimat*, classical Heimatmuseums are often labelled provincial, backward and traditional, their displays usually involve agricultural machines and hardware that went out of use long ago, accompanied by traditional costumes and rural period furniture. Depending on the spatial dimension they cover, the transition from larger Heimatmuseums to smaller city museums is fluent, which results in many hybrid combinations of both. They define *Heimat* by the objects on display and the stories told, and especially museums with exhibitions designed in or before the 1980s mostly rely on the traditional, local narrative of *Heimat*. The bigger a city is, the more likely it is to refer to its local museum as a city museum instead of Heimatmuseum. So is there no familiarity, no sense of belonging, no *Heimat* to be found in cities?

At home in Cities?

The 21st century has often been referred to as 'the century of cities'. While only ten percent of the world's population lived in cities at the end of the 19th century, those numbers hit the fifty percent mark in the early 2000s and are increasing still. The United Nations predict that at least two thirds of the world's population will be city inhabitants by 2050 [UNITED NATIONS 2015, 1]. Clearly, urbanisation is a global megatrend that puts not only cities and their infrastructure to the test, but also challenges the cities' populations in terms of socialisation. A multitude of push and pull factors lead to agglomeration and new metropolises. This shift in allocation of resources and population naturally leads to the conclusion that other areas will be less inhabited, with both – the shrinking and the growing cities – undergoing a constant transformation process.

Cities were never a static environment, so why focus on these transitions now? With the beginning of the 21st century, more than half the world's population call cities their home, more than ever before. Globalisation and its effects lead to heterogeneous, quickly changing societies and therefore to difficulties when it comes to pinning down the distinct differences between cities. Global brands make High Streets look alike, whether they are located in Toronto, Johannesburg or Munich. International travel, communication networks and migration broaden our horizons, but may also leave us slightly confused and with a feeling that traditions, smaller communities and generally what one defines as 'home' slowly becomes less manifest. Cities were even deemed unfit to provide any sense of home at all due to an individual's inability to actively acquire the ample city space himself and thus remaining without a matrix necessary to identify with a place and its culture [GEBHARDT et al. 1995, 8]. A medium sized city, and even more so a metropolis, is too large and complex to be completely experienced and connected with memories and meaning by an individual. But cities and their structures have generated new modes of perception. While the active acquirement in a manageable surrounding happens by first-hand experience, cities are communicated to their inhabitants through images and stereotypes [GEBHARDT et al. 1995, 10]. Landmarks, narratives and a city's character intertwine to an

image that is portrayed through institutions, city marketing and media, ready to build a larger frame for the actual acquirement of the individual's everyday environment, which happens in the small-scale urban quarters and districts. So while the statement that cities provide less individual connecting points is true to a certain extent, it does not mean individuals cannot develop a sense of belonging in larger cities. The operational modes of the process are simply adapted to different scales of experiencing this environment. Much like a dialogue between two people, the building of urban identity can be defined as a communicative act; *Heimat* itself is understood as an "informational necessity", providing individuals with language and cultural norms in order to communicate within a group [STEINBUCH 1986, 45, 51]. This cultural communication is based on the pattern of externalisation (sharing memories with others), objectification (e.g. institutionalising them through media or museums) and as a last step internalisation (in turn being adapted by an individual) [CHRISTMANN 2006, 600-601]. In order to be able to draw from objectified memories and then mix them with subjectified memories, the former have to be made available by communication first. This not only includes oral storytelling or printed communication, but also happens wherever and whenever (hi)stories are repeated, showcased and thereby communicated – as in museums. City museums therefore can be understood as agents of this second-hand experience, enabling larger and more complex city spaces to be measured, understood and internalised by individuals, thus playing a vital role in the construction of urban culture and individual as well as urban collective identity.

City museums as "Urban Positioning Systems"?

We have shown that *Heimat*, and with it plural identities, are created in an active process of dialogue between the individual and his given environment resulting in positioning oneself, based on communicated collective memory with memory institutions as agents. The next step is to determine how and if city museums achieve the representation of *Heimat* or belonging in cities that are subject to rapid change, taking into account the fact that offering different narratives of belonging especially to the growing group of international and internal migrants confronts museums with a great challenge, requiring a new approach to cultural education. Answering the question of how *Heimat* is generated and presented in museums – and if they are successful in doing so – leads me to structuring my research as follows. First, outlining the process of spatial and cultural identity construction, also referred to as territoriality. Secondly, classifying city museums as agents in this process and defining criteria for these museums to become vital physical as well as imagined spaces for identity construction. Third, developing theses from these criteria as to how exactly identity is constructed in city museums, which actors participate on which levels, and then scrutinising these assumptions by fieldwork in city museums. Given that at this point my research is far from finished, only the first two aspects can be discussed in this paper, with a brief outlook to what the findings could be.

The modalities of identity construction have been discussed above in all due brevity and will serve as the theoretical basis for outlining the aforementioned criteria of city museums as dual spaces for this process. *Heimat*, again understood as more than the sum of identities, is imagined and memorised through measure of time (continuity as the base for assumptions of the expected future) and space (mapping experience and memory by linking them to geographical structures such as landmarks and personally attributed places). The urban environment acts as "built memory" [CAPLAN 2016, 9-10], channelling and concentrating individual and collective memory. In this context, the entire city turns into a *musée sentimental* – a sentimental museum, referring to the museum concept of Daniel Spoerri, which highlighted the importance of everyday objects on display in museums without no material value, but immense sentimental value to people [CAPLAN 2016, 10]. Sentiments, at the core of identity processes and combined with physical structures and artefacts, shape the image of the city for every inhabitant. This subjective image of a place, be it the never physically revisited childhood home or current place of living, goes by the name of mental map. It is indeed the subjective, imagined map of a place, where landmarks appear in size and relation to other structures depending on their importance for an individual, which is not necessarily congruent with the landmarks actual position within the place or the importance generally attributed to it by the public. Mental maps are imagined subconsciously, and are organised by the everyday alignments between physical reality and attributed meaning to position an individual within his environment. In order to understand museums as agents of an identity linked just as much to space as it is linked to time, the concept of mental maps from a geographical approach must be transferred to the mental map of identity, helping position an individual within the past, present and future.

The key to this transfer lies in the objects and artefacts that communicate memories, as they themselves have grown to represent certain aspects of memories, and were then institutionalised to carry this meaning in a museum context. If an individual is able to imagine a selective map of his physical surroundings to position himself physically and sentimentally, he is also capable of locating artefacts and their second layer, the intangible value they are embedded in, in a time-place-structure and positioning himself within the narrative of this structure. Drawing from the past, he is able to locate himself in the present and make assumptions for the future. Gottfried Korff introduced the idea of city museums as a positioning system within space and time:

> "[…] city museums could serve as a GPS, a *Global Positioning System*, a place in which concepts of the self are put into relation with the global, the alien, the other, measured and experienced in order to get to know the systematics of the self and the other in their differences and interdependence."[1] [KORFF 2011, 79]

But Korff does not elaborate on this proposal, instead he names three very general aspects of city museums and their opportunities to function as a GPS: offering education about the complex structures of the globalised world from small-scale correlations, reflecting on differences instead of mutuality to generate understanding of cultural heterogeneity, and acting as social meeting places and open public spaces [KORFF 2011, 79-80].

City museums indeed have the character of a positioning system, on one hand through the contents they display, on the other hand through certain criteria that put the whole museum forward as an identification point in a society. But before we carry on to define these criteria, the idea introduced by Korff has to be adapted in order to fit the aforementioned specifics of spatial and cultural navigation and orientation using mental maps. First, I suggest to not name city museums GPS, but rather UPS – Urban Positioning System. While their power to equip visitors with an understanding of the global by offering referencing methods to the regional and local, thereby introducing a matrix to detect and interpret general differences between cultures, their first aim is to define, represent and communicate an urban culture and urban identity. Global references happen not only by chance but on purpose – after the urban space has been mapped. Second, the visitor and his perception of the city have to be brought together with the artefacts presented in the museum as well as written text and other forms of agency. Without this intermediate step, the postulate of a museum as a social space and positioning system expresses a desired effect, but lacks an explanation of how exactly the museum manages to offer navigation and positioning on the two levels 'content' and 'institution'. As mentioned above, objects and landmarks act as anchors and collectors of memory and meaning, thereby building the base for the interpretive act of positioning oneself within this partly physical, partly imagined environment. Describing and interpreting the reciprocal relation between visitors and inanimate objects other than the only one-way interaction calls for a method that recognises the power of agency inherent in objects. The Actor Network Theory (ANT) provides us with a method to not only examine the actions by the visitor towards the object, but also the effects an object has on a visitor and how it is placed within a narrative, both being part of a network that constitutes meaning – the whole complex is then described as 'the museum'.

Having defined how the components of a museum display work together to create identity in a historical perspective, the museum as a whole can also be viewed as a GPS in the sense that Korff implies. In this context, the museum is not only defined by the contents and the stories they tell, but also as an institution that in itself acts as a positioning device. While the process of identification is personal and individual, certain elements of a city's culture are more suitable than others to find general attention and be deemed important, thus enabling identification with this part of urban culture. Jasper Böing defines the criteria needed to turn random elements of urban culture into urban identification points as different potentials, which they have to offer to individuals: "education, aesthetics, distinction, recreation, entertainment, extraordinariness, communitarisation, activity and publicity" [BÖING 2017, 52]. A visit to a historic public pool for example offers the potentials of recreation, possibly entertainment, also activity and publicity, but it lacks the potential of education and probably also those of extraordinariness, distinction or communitarisation. Still, it can be considered a point of urban identification. A city museum, on the other hand, could hold all these potentials, if it implemented contemporary museum strategies such as visitor participation to cater to the potential of activity. This does not imply, however, that visiting local sports facilities or attending festivities are inferior in cultural value to 'high culture', such as museums. Meeting less than nine criteria defined by Böing only allows a prediction how likely it is for an institution or an activity to be considered relevant in the identification process by individuals. If a city museum meets these nine criteria, it can not only be considered as a supplier of identification points by simply posing as a retainer of collective memory, but the institution itself is viewed as 'identification material' by the city's inhabitants.

Conclusion and summary

City museums are, as shown here, wonderfully suited to act as agents of individual as well as collective identity. They offer a wide variety of objects and context to shape mental maps, not only in a spatial, but also in a historical sense. Moving away from a traditional definition of *Heimat*, which usually implies having to be born and raised somewhere to call it home, the definition of *Heimat* as something actively acquired and shaped to fit one's own needs and hopes offers a promising approach to explore identity construction in quickly changing cities. It is available to anyone at any given time, and museums are equipped to offer crucial identification points within diverse communities. Migration movements have already left their traces, and it will be a challenge for all of us to make sure everyone finds

[1] Translated from the German original: "[…] Stadtmuseen [könnten] als GPS fungieren, al sein *Global Positioning System*, al sein Ort also, an dem das Eigene in Relation zum Globalen, zum Anderen, zum Fremden erkundet und vermessen werden kann, um die Ordnung des Eigenen und des Fremden in ihrer Differenz und Verflechtung kennen zu lernen."

identification points. If museums are publicly considered a GPS for not only understanding the current place of living, but also serve as a comparison for different cultures, then this challenge could become a lot easier.

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