

Topoanalysis of the Reichstag Steps: An Effective Understanding of a Retreating Historic Threshold?

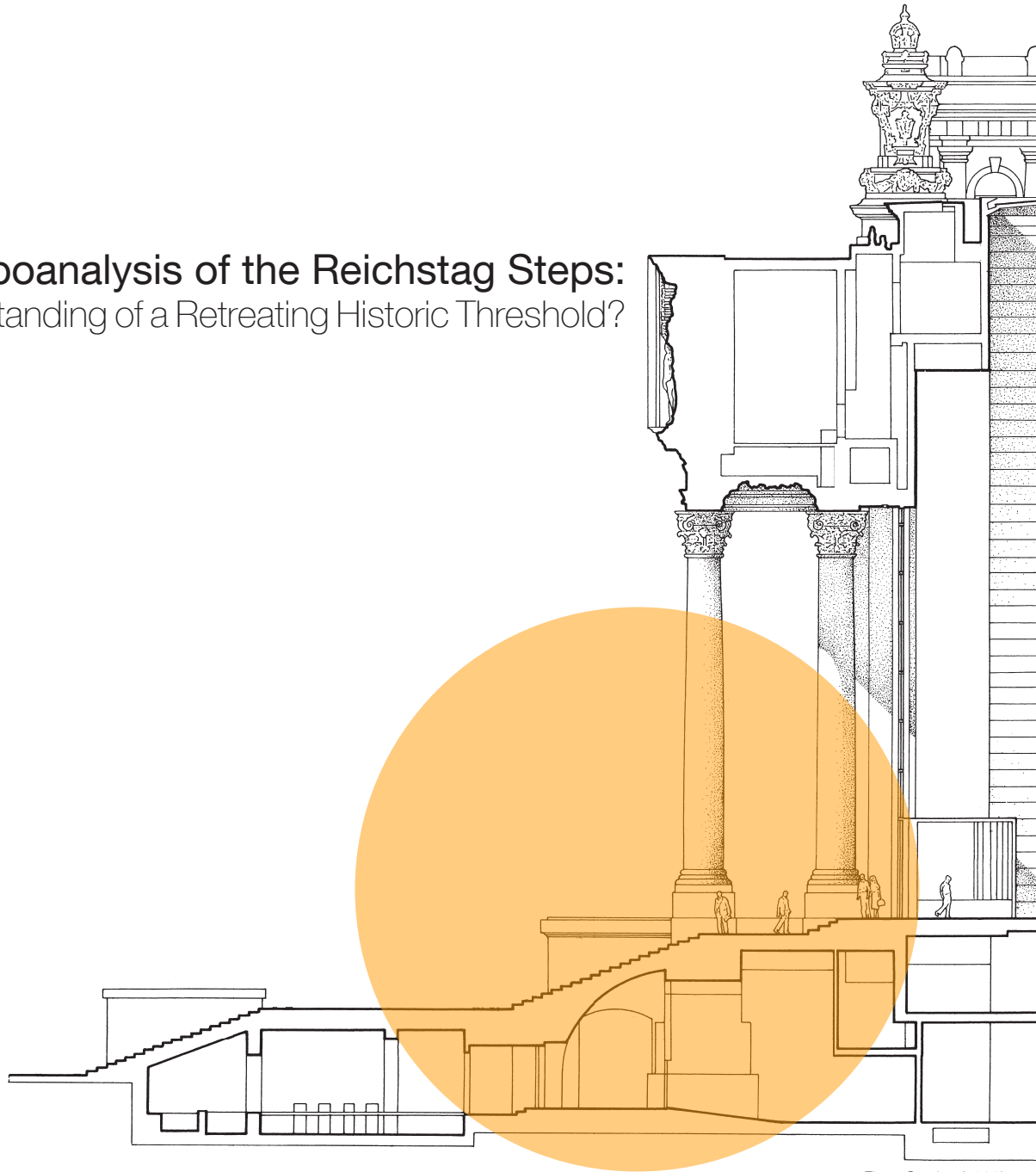


Fig. 1 Section (1999)

Fig. 2 Reichstag Steps (2010)

Abstract	1
Location	2
Experiences	03 13
History + Theory	4
Analysis	8
Conclusion	11
Figures	12
Bibliography	13



Applying Gaston Bachelard's topoanalysis to the memories and daydreams of two contrasting spatial experiences of the Reichstag steps, this essay shows that it is not possible to come to a full understanding of the wider issues of this retreating threshold with just a phenomenological approach. In the process, the loss of a site to daydream highlights the significance of this historic public space.

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Topoanalysis

the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives

(Bachelard, 1969, p.8)

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Fig. 3 Reichstag Damaged (1945)

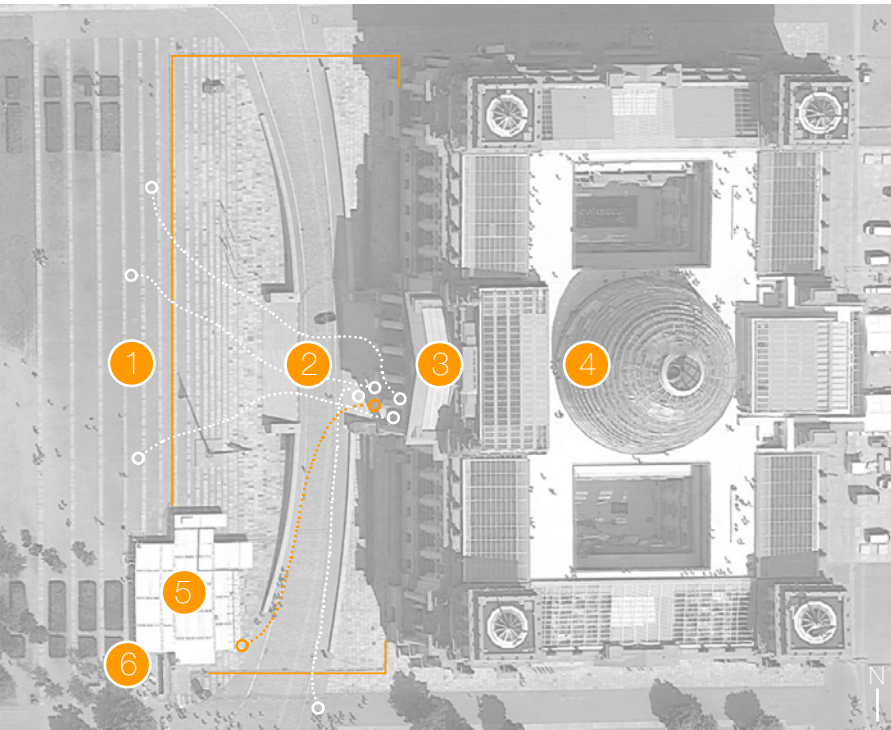


Fig. 4 Site (2014)

- Security barrier
- Current controlled path
- Original flexible paths
- ① Platz der Republik
- ② Lost public space
- ③ Portico / original threshold
- ④ Foster's dome
- ⑤ Visitor's centre
- ⑥ Current threshold



Fig. 5 Russian's take Berlin (1945)

Aged 14 and at a time when my interest in architecture was growing, I first visited the Reichstag during a history school trip, queuing up the steps to enter the building and up in a lift to Foster's dome. Afterwards, when light was fading, as a large group we occupied the steps taking group photos – I daydreamed about the significance of being able to occupy, sit, walk and loiter on the steps of a politically and historically significant building.

Fig. 6 History Class on Steps (2003)



Fig. 7 Inside Foster's Dome (2013)

A decade on, I was keen to revisit one of my favourite buildings and was surprised to see a series of barriers pushing the public back to a new entrance - a new 'security gate' visitors' centre. Having passed security, in limited numbers we walked up the small road to the entrance, bypassing the grand entrance steps and with a clear feeling that we could not hang around outside – there was no space, no shelter to daydream once more.

A dramatic change occurred in November 2010 to the entrance experience of the Reichstag, following a tip-off that Islamic terrorist attacks were being planned in Germany (Banks, 2010). Initially closed to the public, the Reichstag reopened in April 2011 (Spiegel Online, 2011) introducing a new visitors' centre, a container-esque white structure (fig. 8) situated to the south of the Platz der Republik (fig. 4) with barriers and armed security blocking all other public approaches (Kain, 2010b). This essay will begin by looking at the history of the exterior entrance space, alongside the theory of steps and ramps before analysing in parallel this same site (fig. 4) through two contrasting memories of spatial experience, ten years apart. Through applying Bachelard's topoanalysis (1969, p.8) to the memories and daydreams of the space, this essay will discuss if it is possible to come to a phenomenological understanding of these experiences and consider if the ideas put forward in chapter one of 'The Poetics of Space' (Bachelard, 1969) provide an effective lens for understanding the changing dynamics of this "site" of "intimate" life (Bachelard, 1969, p.8).



Fig. 8 Visitors' Centre (2010)

Why use the work of Bachelard and topoanalysis to investigate these experiences? Stilgoe, in his foreword to 'The Poetics of Space', states how Bachelard brings "setting to its rightful place alongside character and plot" (Bachelard, 1969, p.x). This essay will focus on chapter one: 'House. From Cellar to Garret. The Significance of the Hut', which explores the experience of 'rooms' and oneiric episodes (daydreams) attached to them. Although applicable in understanding daydreams, topoanalysis fails to take into consideration both the politics, and often the history, of this space with unavoidable external forces acting outside of it. How can phenomenology apply to the 2013 experience where there is no space to daydream? Is Bachelard's understanding of space purely applicable to highly distorted and fallible memories (Schacter, 1996) and therefore, overall, not effective in understanding the space? Or is topoanalysis, although distorted, key to understanding the significance of the site?



Fig. 10 Anti-nuclear protest (2010)

It is important to note that the phrase 'public space' is used in the context of use, not ownership as discussed in 'Public places and spaces' (Altman and Zube, 1989). Fundamentally unchanged since Paul Wallot's original design (fig. 9), the public entrance space has become the backdrop for the historic and the intimate; for war (fig. 5) and politics; for protest (Berliner Morgenpost, 2011) (fig. 10) and celebration; for a history school trip photo (fig. 6) and lunch break from work. A once public space where people could 'hang out' (fig. 11) has become closed and controlled, the threshold from public to secured space retreating from the portico to the visitors' centre. The significance of these changes should not be down-played with the building being the most visited parliament in the world (Bundestag.de, 2014). Additionally, W. Reilly argues in the foreword to the research project 'The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces' how "small spaces have a major impact on the quality of life" (Whyte, 1980, p.7). A major development has been proposed as a replacement for the 'temporary' visitors' centre in the form of an underground space (Loy 2012). This writer argues that great consideration should be made to how any future developments allow for public access to this historic entrance space. Are the goals for public space (Barnstone, 2005, p.186) and transparency that Sir Norman Foster (Schulz and Foster, 2000, p.11) had when working on its major refurbishment being lost?



Fig. 11 On the steps (2007)

This essay will conclude that Bachelard's topoanalysis cannot, on its own, give an effective understanding of this retreating threshold. Lacking a basis in reality and history, topoanalysis must be balanced with a broader view of the situation which surrounds the space and the practical implications of security and politics.



Fig. 9 Paul Wallot - West Elevation (1882)

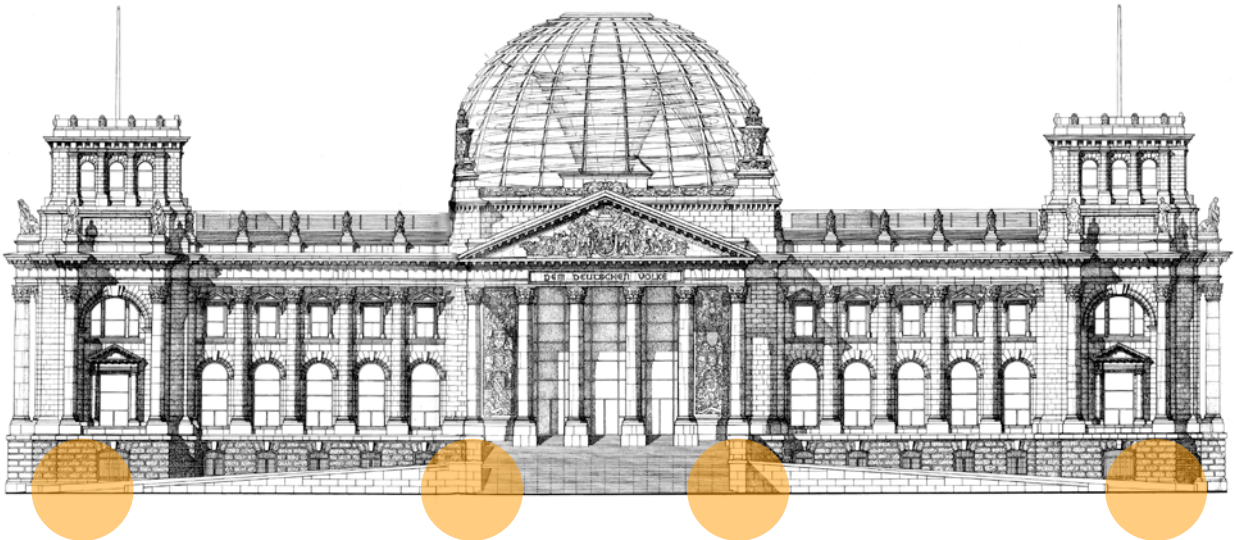


Fig. 14 Norman Foster - West Elevation (1999)

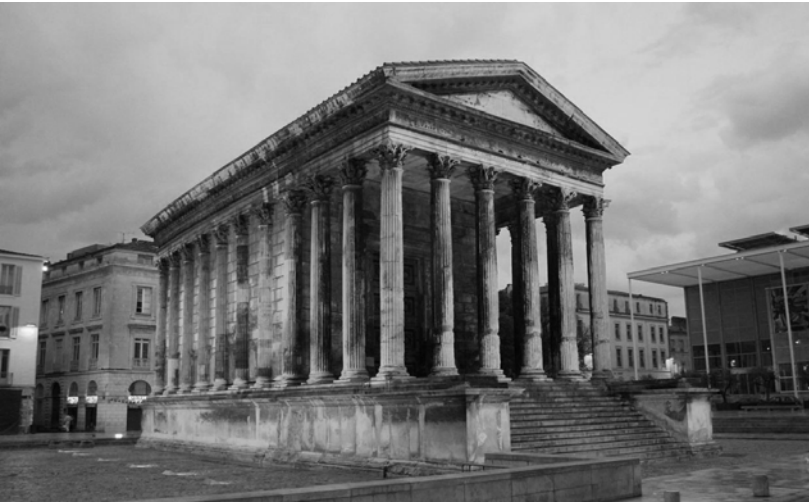


Fig. 12 Maison Carrée (2005)

Paul Wallot was awarded the Reichstag commission in 1882 following a competition open to “those of German tongue” (Schulz and Foster, 2000, p.19) and built in a “synthetic imperial style” regarded by Schulz as the only example of such style (2000, p.20), although others have considered it Neo-renaissance (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2013). That said, the entrance approach from the west follows a clear Roman style with a series of steps in direct flight, a setup often used for a dramatic approach “where they continue the line of movement from one level to the next” (Blanc, 1996, p.12) reflecting examples such as the Maison Carrée (fig. 12). Unlike the Greek steps, the Roman steps allowed for congregation (Blanc, 1996, p.16), something that became a major public use for the steps - especially since Foster reinstated the original entry sequence “up the grand flight of steps” in 1999 (Schulz and Foster 2000, p.9). The portico offers a moderate amount of shelter and shaded space composed of six Corinthian order columns (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2014).

The Reichstag fire of 1933 left the building unusable and it was further damaged during bombing. It was largely abandoned and nearly torn down, until a partial restoration was undertaken (from 1961 to 1964) by Paul Baumgarten who stripped much of the internals, which left the outside predominantly unchanged (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2013). Wrapped by Christo and Jeanne-Claude in 1995, it was then developed to its current state by Foster and Partners in 1999 (Schulz and Foster 2000). Considering this history it is surprising to note that the two flights of steps, (fig. 13) ramped road and portico entrance have seen little to no change (Schulz and Foster 2000, p.46). A small amount of restoration had to be done following damage from both the fire and the war, additionally there was a subtle change to the road approach (fig. 14) alongside the width of the lower steps being reduced.

Through the lens of Bachelard can this work come to an understanding of the experiences of 2003 and 2013 and thus the space?

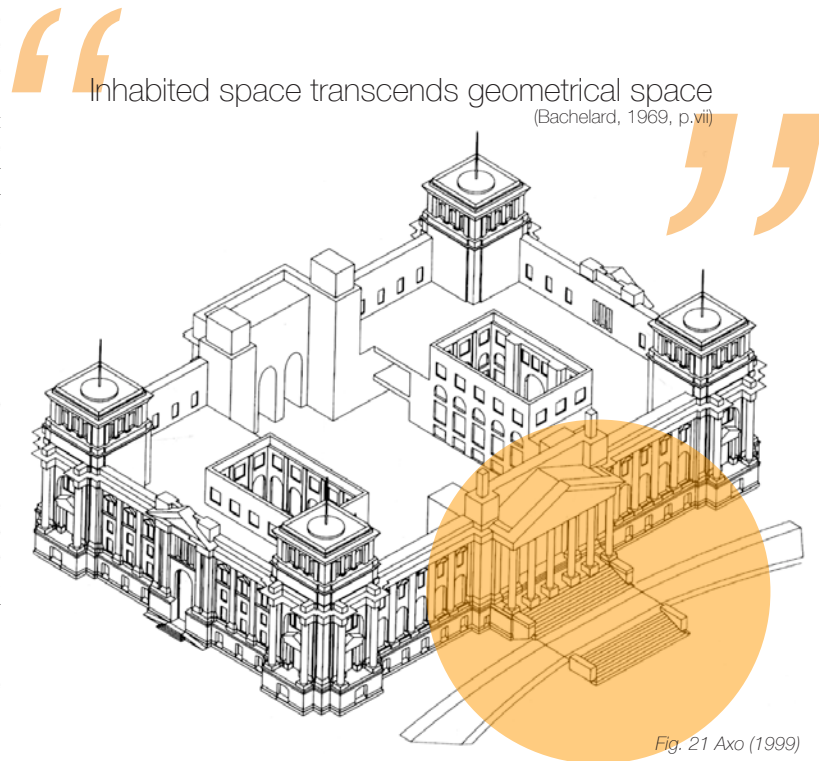
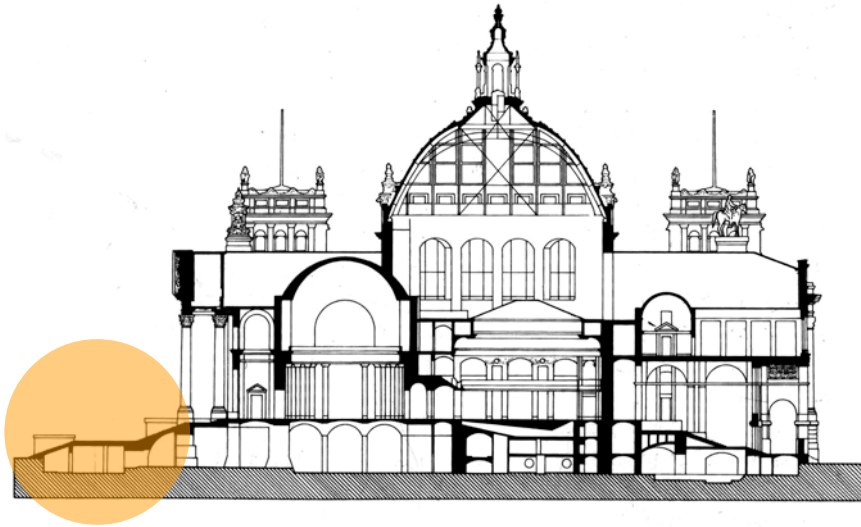
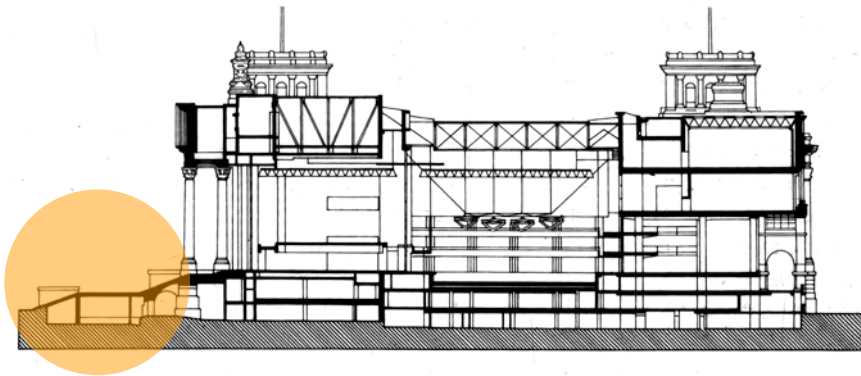


Fig. 21 Axo (1999)

Paul Wallot



Paul Baumgarten



Norman Foster

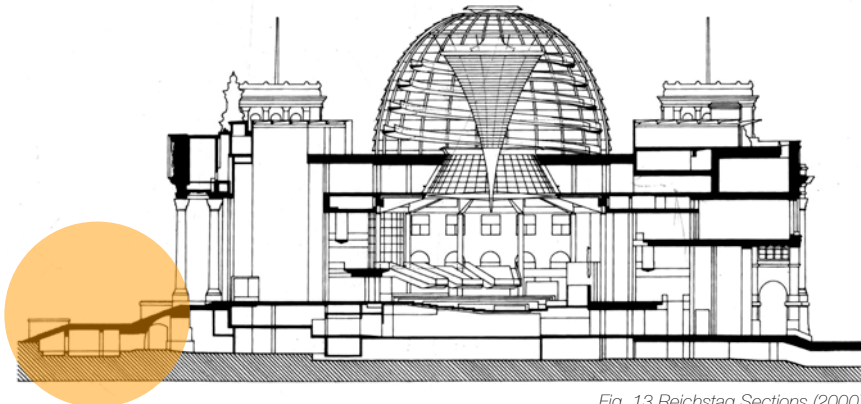


Fig. 13 Reichstag Sections (2000)

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This 'home' is the steps of the Reichstag (fig. 21). Bachelard states he is studying issues of the "poetic imagination" (1969, p.xv) and that the "poetic act has no past, at least no recent past" nor an "echo of the past". Yet within the same paragraph he writes that "distant past resounds with echoes" (1969, p.xvi) in poetic images and later the "poet does not confer the past of his image upon me" (1969, p.xvii). In attempting to analyse what Bachelard means here, (though his arguments could be seen to be contradictory) is that the historically significant past of these steps does not rise to the surface of the poetic understanding of space. So, according to Bachelard, the steps are not an object to be described or analysed in terms of why they might be comfortable, "we must go beyond the problems of description" (1969, p.4).

The now-recalled daydreaming of 2003 was encapsulated in a shell of school history lessons and teachings of German World War history and now this "past comes to dwell in a new house" (Bachelard, 1969, p.5). Seated on the steps (fig. 6), this was a shelter for daydreaming, stone below and portico behind. Yet this daydream is of history, of significance; of what this space meant now and in the past; can that be a poetic image on Bachelard's terms? Although Bachelard's views with regard to the importance of historical significance tend to alternate,



Fig. 15 Steps as play space (2008)

This analysis however must be questioned, memory is fallible (Schacter, 1996) - even Bachelard himself acknowledges this to a degree: "Memory - what a strange thing it is!" (1969, p.9). This recollection of daydreaming is triggered by a photo (fig. 6), which encapsulates the experiences. This photo can be considered in the poetic sense but any memories derived from it are likely to be highly inaccurate and influenced by current events and conditions, as discussed in the research paper "Changing History: Doctored Photographs Affect Memory for Past Public Events" (Sacchi, Agnoli and Loftus, 2007). As well as being rebuilt over time "the reconstructive nature of memory for time is underscored by various illusions and distortions" (Schacter 1996, p.117). Bachelard states that memories are motionless, defined in space and the more secured they are the "sunder they are" (1969, p.9) - he arguably does not fully understand how unsecured memories are. What this topoanalysis fails to pick up on are the wider concerns that although buried were present: the police positioned around; the metal entry scanners and fear from the attacks of September 11, 2001. That said, this writer argues that overall, this is an effective understanding of the experience and space in 2003 for most who used it.



Fig. 16 New York Public Library (1938)

he writes "Past, present and future give the house different dynamisms" (1969, p.6). Specifically for Bachelard the experience of stairs is key, the onerism is of "go[ing] up the attic stairs...ascension to a more tranquil solitude" something reflected in the Reichstag's grand stepped approach: "Twelve-year olds even go up it in ascending scales...what joy for the legs to go up four steps at a time!" (1969, p.26). The stone steps are part seating, part pathway and part play space (fig. 15). The idea of steps as public space was researched in 'The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces', where Whyte studied the steps outside New York Public Library (fig. 16), which have a similar entrance approach as the Reichstag: "The range of [stepped] space provides an infinity of possible grouping" (Whyte, 1980, p.32). This topoanalysis paints a peaceful picture of an active public space, littered with small but important moments and daydreams, a space that can be both historically significant and intimate.

“ All really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home ”

(Bachelard, 1969, p.5)

“...memories of other places we have lived come back to us
(Bachelard, 1969, p.5)”



Fig. 19 Reichstag (2013)

13

As Bachelard works through his thought process, he returns to the discussion of history, arguing that "Great images have both a history and a pre-history" (1969, p.33) and states that the oneiric image comes into greater significance in later life, something that has clearly happened between 2003 and 2013. He highlights that the roots of the image dig deep, well beyond those fixed in our memories (1969, p.33). However, how can topoanalysis come to an understanding of this 'new' 2013 space, without an oneiric experience? Bachelard gives no answer to this question, but by taking a non-physiological, non-poetic approach, this analysis can see that fears drove a new focus on security over public space.

Barnstone (2005) notes concern in 2005 - even before the 2010 changes - that greater accessibility was not achieved with Foster's design, and that security



Fig. 17 Queues in Platz der Republik (2009)

was increased after the attacks of September 11, 2001 (2005, p.192). However, the 2010 changes made it clear: the shelter was gone, this was a new home, memories return but this was no longer a space to daydream. This was secured space, and not in the sense of safe, there was no sitting on the steps, no resting, there was a specific path (fig. 4) to be walked and not experienced, "What a dynamic, handsome object is a path" (Bachelard, 1969, p.11) – now no longer dynamic. The potential of terror threats, like those seen in Mumbai in 2010 (Banks, 2010) and subsequent evidence of security flaws in the Reichstag (Die Welt, 2010) have changed it. There was no reconstituting the daydreams of past while in the space, only outside of the experience is there a chance to daydream and consider the former dwelling of 2003 (Bachelard, 1969, p.6). There was a change, there was a loss, but as Bachelard's methods don't encourage further exploration this wider contextual analysis will continue.

Queues of tourists once snaked all the way down the steps (Barnstone, 2005, p.207) and into the Platz der Republik (fig. 17) but the new visitors' centre came with new rules, including pre-registration and identity checking - something not wanted even by the officials who put them in place. The politician and former Vice President of the Bundestag Wolfgang Thierse, when interviewed by Berliner Morgenpost newspaper, has argued for the restrictions to be lifted in the near future (Kain, 2010a). The security issues initially focused on the threat of terrorists exploiting the tourist accessibility of the building but reports have shown that 23,000 people had access without going through security - including outside contractors (Die Welt, 2010). Even with the threats that caused the initial closure dissipating, the security has stayed in place for four years including the red and white barriers (fig. 18) that define the new threshold between public and controlled space (Kain, 2010b). The federal police said that the threats were highly speculative and Interior Minister Erhart Körting stated



Fig. 18 Barriers (2010)

that, in a free society, absolute protection from terror attacks was not possible (Berliner Morgenpost, 2010). News reports often mention the desire to remove this 'temporary' container-esque (Jacobs, 2013) white structure and barriers to restore the uninterrupted view of the Reichstag (fig. 19), without mention of whether access to the entrance space of the Reichstag would be restored too. In 2012 the discussion moved to a solution based on the U.S. Capital (Kain, 2012): an underground visitors' centre (fig. 20) that would replace the temporary containers, improving the experience of the Reichstag and increasing visitor numbers which had significantly dropped in 2011 (Berliner Morgenpost, 2012).



Fig. 20 U.S. Capital Visitor's Centre (2012)

There was potential for this 'home' to return with removal of the current barriers. However, financial implications have stopped the development, with a feasibility study suggesting that the cost would be €500 million (The Local, 2013).

Bachelard's topoanalysis gives a poor understanding of this 2013 experience and limited understanding of how and why the threshold has retreated. As Benedikt argues, Bachelard's methodology is "of a world gone by, where children wore wool, people walked in rainy streets and closed gates behind them" (Danze and Sonnenberg, 2012). Benedikt suggest we are not 'here' anymore, and that daydreaming has been lost to distractions in the form of iPods and smart phones (Danze and Sonnenberg, 2012). This argument is relevant as it could be interpreted that the heightened security and tension in a post-9/11 era, in this case, is the distraction.

“ Nowhere is this reconciliation of past and present expressed more clearly
 (Schulz and Foster, 2000, p.111) ”

Having applied Gaston Bachelard’s topoanalysis to the memories and daydreams of two spatial experiences of the Reichstag steps, a clear distinction between them has been established. With roots digging deep (Bachelard, 1969, p.33) the daydream of 2003 already had great historic depth, made only more powerful by the changes in 2010. Topoanalysis was overall a partially effective understanding of the 2003 experience and space, as it provided a “new angle of vision” (Bachelard 1969, p.x). The shelter for the daydreamer cannot ignore or repress the past; it cannot be a distant echo. This writer argues that Bachelard’s lens is often flawed and phenomenology can only provide an understanding of select experiences.

The same techniques are clearly not applicable to 2013. However, the loss in ability to daydream may mean a lack of phenomenological understanding, but it highlights the significance of an historic public space. It is disappointing that the plans for a permanent, unobtrusive underground visitors’ centre have been put on hold. The experience in this space is important in the political and social sense. Barnstone (2005) explores the symbolic nature of glass and transparency in a country with a secretive, oppressive governmental past. However, a person does not experience transparency in the grand symbolic scale of the Reichstag dome. It is felt when interacting with people or a spatial experience. Without the research that comes from the systematic, non-physiological; political; wider study of this space; an effective understanding of the change in threshold would have stayed a buried echo in a poetic image.



Fig. 23 Seated on steps (2009)

figures

Figure 1. Section (1999) [Drawing] Available at: <<http://www.fosterandpartners.com/projects/reichstag-new-german-parliament/>> [Accessed 19 Apr. 2014].

Figure 2. Larenkov, Sergey (2010) Reichstag Steps [Collage] Available at: <<http://sergey-larenkov.livejournal.com/>> [Accessed 19 Apr. 2014].

Figure 3. Reichstag Damaged (1945) [Photograph] Available at: <<http://www.razyboard.com/system/morethread-berlin-zomer-1945-wilhelmina-2208296-5909795-0.html>> [Accessed 19 Apr. 2014].

Figure 4. Site (2014) [Diagram]

Figure 5. Russian's take Berlin (1945) [Photograph] Available at: <http://civilizacionsocialista.blogspot.co.uk/2006_05_01_archive.html> [Accessed 19 Apr. 2014].

Figure 6. History Class on Steps (2003) [Photograph] Author's Image

Figure 7. Inside Foster's Dome (2013) [Photograph] Author's Image

Figure 8. Zinken, Paul (2010) Visitor's Centre [Photograph] Available at: <<http://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/provisorium-auf-dauer-in-berlin-besuch-im-reichstag-bleibt-umstaendlich/8226244.html>> [Accessed 19 Apr. 2014].

Figure 9. Wallot, Paul (1882) East Elevation [Drawing] Schulz, B. and Foster, N. 2000. The Reichstag. Munich: Prestel.

Figure 10. Knaek, Kai-Martin (2010) Anti-nuclear protest [Photograph] Available at: <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Anti-atomkraft-demonstration_berlin_2010_vor_dem_reichstag.jpg> [Accessed 19 Apr. 2014].

Figure 11. Trow, Russell (2007) On the steps [Photograph] Available at: <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/gluemoon/446460258/>> [Accessed 19 Apr. 2014].

Figure 12. Caddell, Jim (2005) Maison Carrée [Photography] Available at: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/jim_caddell/55313504/> [Accessed 19 Apr. 2014].

Figure 13. Reichstag Sections (2000) [Drawing] Schulz, B. and Foster, N. 2000. The Reichstag. Munich: Prestel.

Figure 14. Foster, Norman (1999) East Elevation [Drawing] Schulz, B. and Foster, N. 2000. The Reichstag. Munich: Prestel.

Figure 15. Tennant, William (2008) Steps as play space [Photograph] Available at: <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/tigerbill/2295995834/>> [Accessed 19 Apr. 2014].

Figure 16. Jowers, James (1938) New York Public Library [Photography] Available at: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/george_eastman_house/2987740376/> [Accessed 19 Apr. 2014].

Figure 17. moarplease (2009) Queues in Platz der Republik [Photography] Available at: <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/helenzhang/4911972691/>> [Accessed 19 Apr. 2014].

Figure 18. Barriers (2010) [Photography] Available at: <http://msnbcmedia.msn.com/MSNBC/Components/Photo/_new/101118-german-security-hmed-330a.jpg> [Accessed 19 Apr. 2014].

Figure 19. Avda (2013) Reichstag [Photography] Available at: <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Berlin_-_Reichstag_building_at_night_-_2013.jpg> [Accessed 19 Apr. 2014].

Figure 20. U.S. Capitol Visitors' Centre (2012) [Photography] Available at: <<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-buildings/us-capitol-visitor-center>> [Accessed 19 Apr. 2014].

Figure 21. Foster, Norman (1999) Axo [Drawing] Schulz, B. and Foster, N. 2000. The Reichstag. Munich: Prestel.

Figure 22. Herman, Linsey (2009) Steps at night [Photography] Available at: <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/queijo/4238772523/>> [Accessed 19 Apr. 2014].

Figure 23. Forestlake (2009) Seated on steps [Photography] Available at: <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/51708027@N00/4953368635/>> [Accessed 19 Apr. 2014].

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Fig. 22 Steps at night (2009)