Over the course of the last ten years, there has been a resurgence of interest in the popular and material culture of the 1950s. Much of the period’s renewed presence has taken the form of a typical cyclical revival of 1950s retro style and fashion. However, the postwar past has also been reconstructed and re-imagined through more lasting forms of cultural representation, such as television and cinema, literature and museums. These retrospectives can be seen as part of a wider process of memorialization connected to the most recent memory phenomenon, in which an increasing number of people are engaging in memory work related to the postwar period.

Focusing on the museological response to the revival of the 1950s, this article examines the relevance of Pierre Nora’s paradigmatic concept of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) for the study of how museal sites function as loci for memory work in contemporary France and Germany. Adopting a comparative case study approach, it explores three museal sites devoted to postwar material culture based in France, western Germany and eastern Germany respectively. These sites have been selected on the basis of their interpretive strategies and more “bottom-up” approaches to the past, which demonstrate a more nuanced understanding of both remembering and forgetting based on the central dynamics of temporality, spatiality, and materiality. In a departure from Nora’s thesis, the article finds that despite the artificiality and constructed nature of such sites, the way in which they are able to engage different memory communities means that they are not simply repositories for static, historicized memories but that they have a wide capacity for dynamic, spontaneous memory work. As a result, and because of the organizational nature and geographical locations of the museums concerned, this article also considers *lieux de mémoire* as potential props of more marginalized pasts and localized identities; offering a new engagement with memory that provides a response to, and different perspective on, “top-down”, state-centred narratives.

The Memory Phenomenon and the Revival of the 1950s

The cultural reinvestment in the 1950s must be understood, at least in part, as an offshoot of a much wider foregrounding of the ‘paradigm of memory’ in everyday life and academic scholarship. Appearing under a wide range of conceptual guises, including a ‘memory boom’, an ‘obsession with memory’, ‘commemorative fever’, a ‘generation of memory’ and, most recently, a ‘memory

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2 In order to avoid confusion, East and West Germany (with capital letters) are used to denote the pre-unification states of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in existence until 1990; eastern and western Germany (with lower case letters) are used to refer to the post-unification regions of unified Germany in existence since 1990.

complex’ to name but a few, the turn to memory has brought about a fundamental shift in the way that societies articulate their past and identities through heritage. Once the realm of professional historians, chroniclers, and archivists, the past has now been decentralized and democratized. This has been to such an extent that “normal”, everyday people are now taking ownership and control of their own genealogies and personal experiences through a wide range of memory-related activities at a grassroots level. Larger memory communities, such as regions and nations, are also increasingly recognizing what G.J. Ashworth, Brian Graham and J.E. Tunbridge see as the ‘pluralization of the past’ in the face of extensive demographic changes, where memory has become a mode of public commemoration and an embattled site of identity politics. Museums have responded to these transformations with equal vigour and implemented change through a variety of institutional agendas, strategies, and policies. No longer branded a cultural monolith, the museum is increasingly seen as a site of ‘revolutions’, becoming a ‘fluid and responsive, dynamic, shaping, political, particular and complex’ site. The proliferation of more localized and private museums in particular, often concerned with the narration of micro-histories, might be seen as ‘locally acceptable formulae’ of the aforementioned pluralization of the past. Encompassing a wide range of memory and heritage practices, however, the museum need not necessarily be a single, physical institution in the traditional sense of the word. As Andreas Huyssen observed as early as 1995, renovation, retro fashions, visiting flea and antiques markets, memoir writing, the digital archiving of data: all these memory activities can be seen as “museological”, and have made the museum, in a ‘broad, amorphous sense...a key paradigm of contemporary cultural activities’.

It is within this larger framework of musealization that the 1950s have re-emerged in France and Germany since the mid-2000s. In France, the television channel France 5 has led the way in producing documentaries about the 1950s, narrating the postwar period through the objects, people, and political events which shaped and characterized it, such as in the film Le Roman des années 50 in 2006 and the 1950s series of the programme Graffiti in 2008. The year 2010 saw the release of journalist and writer Jean-Louis Marzorati’s first publication on the 1950s, C’était les années 50, as well as the two-part television drama Ah, c’était ça la vie! This was aired on France 2 and explored the lives of three friends living in the Saint-Germain-des-Prés area of Paris at the height of its fame as a hub of intellectual and cultural activity in the mid-1950s. These have been followed

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5 Ashworth, Graham and Tunbridge, Pluralising Pasts.


7 Ashworth, Graham and Tunbridge, Pluralising Pasts, p. 211.

8 Huyssen, Twilight Memories, p. 14.
more recently by the 2012 cinematic romantic comedy *Populaire*, which tells the story of a gifted speed typist in late-1950s Normandy.

The cultural renaissance of the 1950s began a few years earlier in Germany with the 2003 box office hit *Das Wunder von Bern* about the “miraculous” West German victory in the 1954 FIFA World Cup final. At the same time, *Wirtschaftswunder* (economic miracle) rhetoric was invoked by Angela Merkel as the leader of the Christian Democratic Union, who called for ‘new founding years’ of a ‘new social market economy’. This intensified throughout her election campaign. The mid-2000s brought about what can only be described as “fifties fever” in Germany: the six-part ARD documentary *Unsere 50er Jahre* that aired on Das Erste at the end of 2005 was an extremely popular television series and the accompanying book of the same name became a bestseller; icons and “dream women” of 1950s cinema were celebrated in the “Retrospective” section of the 2006 Berlinale film festival; and in April 2007, the weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel* ran a *Wirtschaftswunder* series, dubbing Germany’s economic success of the digital age the “Wirtschaftswunder 2.0”. Nostalgia-infused explorations of the 1950s have since given way to more critical reappraisals of the period, which attempt to rewrite more marginal narratives into cultural memory. Journalist and writer Helga Hirsch’s 2012 literary portrayal *Endlich wieder leben: Die fünfziger Jahre im Rückblick von Frauen*, for instance, focuses on the lives of women in East and West Germany in the 1950s.

**Museums as Sites of Memory**

Alongside literature and visual culture, the 1950s have been memorialised in an increasing number of museums and exhibitions throughout France and Germany. In addition to the numerous permanent museums, exhibitions, and temporary displays dedicated to the 1950s there have been several significant touring exhibitions. The most recent of these are the House of Bavarian History’s *Wiederaufbau und Wirtschaftswunder* that went on display in numerous Bavarian towns and cities from March to September 2013, and the DOMITYS residential home service’s *L’Expo des années 50* which completed a two-year “Tour de France” of residential homes between September 2011 and October 2013. The sheer volume and breadth of museal representations is indicative of a memorial landscape of the 1950s in France and Germany that is both complex and multifarious. Although explicitly rooted in the postwar past, it is a landscape that is also being actively formed and shaped in the present, in which memory work is undertaken and memories are created, sustained, and shared between different groups of people and generations, including those who have no first-hand experience of the period. People interact with these museal sites both as visitors wishing to remember, engage with, or learn more about the past, and as museum professionals in a bid to

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9 In addition to the 1950s museums discussed in this article, I am aware of permanent museums (including those which have official museum status and those which do not) dedicated to the 1950s in France and Germany in: Allouville-Bellefosse (Seine-Maritime, France); Saint-Sulpice-des-Landes (Loire-Atlantique, France); Bad Soden-Salmünster (Hesse, Germany); Büdigen (Hesse, Germany); Burgpreppach (Bavaria, Germany); and Schwäbisch Gmünd (Baden-Württemberg).

document their own pasts and/or facilitate the interpretation of heritage material. As memorial interfaces between visitors and curators, and between objects and narratives, these sites are amongst some of the most important institutions of cultural memory pertaining to the postwar period in France and Germany. They have the ability to confirm and challenge consensus on the past and construct and deconstruct notions of identity.

As such they constitute some of the most privileged lieux de mémoire: a theoretical concept developed by French historian Pierre Nora between 1984 and 1993, which argues that an historicized, artificial memory ‘crystallizes and secretes itself’ at sites such as museums because of the disappearance of an authentic, social memory. According to Nora, lieux de mémoire exist ultimately because of a specific ‘intention to remember’, evident for museums in their very existence, and it is this which distinguishes them from simply lieux d’histoire (sites of history). For sites to be lieux de mémoire they must hold material, symbolic, and functional value simultaneously. As physical entities and repositories of material objects, museums are by nature characterized by materiality, although the increase in the number of virtual museums and digital collections online is perhaps evidence that this is no longer essential. As storehouses of, and bridges to, the past, all museums are invested with a particular kind of symbolic aura and can represent sites of symbolic actions, such as commemorative events and interaction between different groups of people. Whilst the primary function of museums continues to spark much debate amongst museum professionals and academics, most museal sites now adopt a more holistic approach and are committed to both the preservation and communication of the tangible and intangible heritages of different communities for present and future publics. Moreover, as sites based on the safeguarding and transmission of cultural memories, museums constitute the foundations of the memorial heritages and identities of national memory communities.

Whilst Nora’s thesis provides a useful model for understanding the relationship between sites of cultural memory and national identity, the concept of sites of memory is by no means uncontested. This article situates itself amongst those extant studies that find that the term does not always provide an adequate explanation of the dynamics of memory at such sites. The notion of a site of memory can be easily misconstrued, as though to suggest, as Ann Rigney argues, that collective remembrance is somehow anchored to sites of memory in a static and amnesic way. Nora’s choice of the very terms ‘lieu’ and ‘mémoire’ has also been critiqued as too imprecise. Considering Nora’s examples of lieux de mémoire are wide ranging and often wholly unrelated to any physical site or sense of place, the term ‘lieu’ is in many ways misleading. ‘Mémoire’ too requires more clarity, as the memory to which Nora refers is not a spontaneously occurring memory,

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12 Nora, ‘Between Memory and History’, p. 19.
13 Ibid., pp. 18–19.
14 This represents a significant departure from the core functions of museums in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For an overview of this institutional change, see G. Black, The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2005).
but rather a historized memory, altered by what Nora sees as the gradual erosion of memory by history. What Nora attempts to define in *Les Lieux de mémoire* is not a theoretical model of memory *per se*, but rather, as Steven Englund suggests, the ‘willed re-creation’ of historized memory relating to French national identity at certain sites.

Allowing for some conceptual malleability with regard to terminology, what is perhaps more problematic is that the model of *lieux de mémoire* seems bereft of an engagement with the dynamics of forgetting. With the work of memory scholars highlighting the interconnectedness of remembering and forgetting, it seems that any theoretical engagement with *lieux de mémoire* must also take into account the way in which such sites are a result of, perpetuate, or confront forgetting. *Lieux de mémoire* must, therefore, acknowledge the way in which sites simultaneously act as Nancy Wood suggests, as *lieux d’oubli.* There is a notable absence in *Les Lieux de mémoire* of the more problematic aspects of the French past: what, for instance, ‘are the lieux de mémoire that fail to include Dien Bien Phu?’ Nora defends his exclusion of colonial and postcolonial sites of memory from *Les Lieux de mémoire* in *Lieux de mémoire, Erinnerungsorte: D’un modèle français à un projet allemand* with the rather perverse remark that the French colonial experience has left only a faint trace on collective memory. Nora’s nostalgic approach to the overwhelmingly national, republican sites of memory in *Les Lieux de mémoire* suggests an epistemological shift is necessary for the application of the model to other memory communities.

This article outlines a nuanced application of sites of memory in order to understand the dynamic quality of remembering and forgetting at three museums based in France and Germany: the Appartement témoin Perret in Le Havre on the northwest French coast; the Museum der 50er Jahre in Bremerhaven on the northwest coast of western Germany; and the Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR (DOK) in Eisenhüttenstadt, on the border with Poland in the eastern German state of Brandenburg. It is based on the premise that memory of the

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17 Nora, ‘Between Memory and History’, p. 8.
23 I use the term museum throughout this article as a readily-understandable designation for the institutions discussed, all of which serve to exhibit tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The term is, however, imprecise: the Appartement témoin Perret is classified as a micro-museum, the Museum der 50er Jahre a private museum and the DOK a public documentation centre. A documentation centre differs slightly from a museum in that it prioritizes the mediation of historical facts and information over the exhibition of material objects (and as such is often heavily text-focused), and is concerned with the unravelling of stereotypes and myths. The distinction is important in so far as how the site understands and presents itself, but as the DOK also places strong emphasis on exhibition of authentic artefacts, the term museum seems equally appropriate for this particular discussion.
1950s is negotiated museologically not through museums as discrete sites of memory, but rather as an ensemble of sites which function as part of a network of memory. Forged from the dialectical process of remembering and forgetting, such sites are intrinsically connected at different semantic levels and include: the temporal (the thematization of the 1950s as a historical experience); the spatial (the geographical location, architecture and manipulation of exhibition space); and the material (the specific everyday objects). The article demonstrates that through the interplay of these sites the case study museums constitute complex sites of memory, which represent cornerstones of the heritages and identities of smaller memory communities and which have the ability to generate natural, spontaneous memory work.

Appartement témoin Perret

The Appartement témoin Perret is a public micro-museum owned and managed by the city of Le Havre. It consists of a fully-furnished model postwar apartment situated in an apartment block in the heart of the city. The entire city centre was redesigned by Belgian architect Auguste Perret and reconstructed in the postwar period in a bid to develop modern, durable residential accommodation and public spaces in an economically viable way following the extensive bombing of the city during the Second World War. By the time of liberation on 12 September 1944, around seventeen thousand buildings had been completely or partially destroyed and housing had been reduced by almost half, making swift and efficient reconstruction in Le Havre critical.24 The apartment block in which the Appartement témoin Perret is situated was part of the first phrase of reconstruction in 1947 and is decorated according to ensembles presented by various designers between 1947 and 1954. The apartment is thus archetypal of the new housing available in Le Havre throughout the 1950s.

The Appartement témoin Perret is a direct product of the high physical and material cost of the liberation of Le Havre. However, the temporal signification of the apartment is not the postwar but rather specifically the 1950s, as the beginning of the progressive Trente Glorieuses (the “glorious thirty” years of productivity- and consumption-fuelled economic growth and high standards of living that lasted roughly from 1945 until the 1973 oil crisis).25 Although the apartment dates to this period (as part of the construction of apartment block V40 in 1947), this is a selective retrospective narrative that is being imposed on the museal space through exhibition content and design, interpretation strategies, and museum literature. In many ways this appears to be in conformity with the French national narrative and the universal view of the 1950s as a heyday that has filtered through retrospective cultural representations of the period to present generations. However, the 1950s as an era of interior design progress, in which architects and designers responded to the needs of future inhabitants for flexible living and modern comfort, is presented in the apartment and accompanying literature as something very unique to Le Havre. Visitors are invited to discover what was presented at the time as the “housing of tomorrow” through an appreciation of the apartment’s formal and aesthetic qualities, such as the complex optimization of space, natural light, and airflow. The apartment is equally conceived as a space in which it is possible to gain an accurate insight into everyday life in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and is advertised as such on the city of Le Havre.


Havre’s official website and in the museum’s advertising leaflet. Fully furnished and including carefully placed personal objects such as items of clothing and toiletries, the museum is presented as a kind of time capsule, acting as a fixed repository for the cultural memories of day-to-day domestic life at the height of the reconstruction period in Le Havre. In reality, however, the extent to which the apartment is able to effectively portray everyday life during this period is limited because the apartments turned out to be beyond the financial means of many of the city’s residents.

Despite the seemingly static nature of the apartment, the museum fulfils an active role in the cultural memory and identity of the city. Since 2001, Le Havre has sported the title of City of Art and History, an official label awarded by the Ministry of Culture and Communication to those towns and districts committed to the cultural development of their heritage and architecture. Le Havre’s application for the award revolved principally around the reactivation of memory concerning its 1950s architecture, in order to make the city’s inhabitants, particularly young people, more aware of it. On successful procurement of the label, the city proposed a series of thematic engagements with heritage and architecture aimed at fitting in with school curricula. Two of these involved examining the modern architecture of the reconstruction period, and the ambiance of the postwar period in the form of the Appartement témoin Perret. The apartment was conceived as a key pedagogical tool in informing young people about 1940s and 1950s architecture and everyday life, and designed to provide a basis for a new civic pride centred on Le Havre’s heritage and architecture.

Furthering this aim, the Appartement témoin Perret opened in 2006 as part of the designation of the entire postwar reconstructed city centre of Le Havre as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2005. The city was granted this status on the basis that it represents an important step in the integration of urban planning traditions with modern developments in architecture, technology, and town planning, as well as being an ‘exceptional’ postwar example of urban architecture. Since the inscription of Le Havre’s city centre on the World Heritage List, it has become an important site of memory, founded, in Nora’s terms, on an intention to remember and memorialize reconstruction success and ingrain this narrative in the cultural memory of the city and its inhabitants. It also represents the foundation for a re-imagined civic identity centred on a positive identification with an urban architecture and design style whose quality has finally been recognised, as the foreword to the apartment catalogue puts it, in ‘the power but also the poetry of concrete’.

The large-scale postwar design and reconstruction of housing such as that of the Appartement témoin Perret was by no means exclusive to Le Havre. Similar projects were underway during the reconstruction period in

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27 This shortcoming is acknowledged in the museum catalogue but is not made apparent in the museum space itself or related to visitors in guided tours.
30 The large-scale postwar design and reconstruction of housing such as that of the Appartement témoin Perret was by no means exclusive to Le Havre. Similar projects were underway during the reconstruction period in
significance of the period serves equally to consolidate Le Havre’s Second World War experience into one homogenous narrative of widespread destruction by allied bombs at the careful exclusion of more painful local and national war narratives.\textsuperscript{31}

In order to maximize visitor engagement with the Appartement témoin Perret as a site of memory, visits take place exclusively on a guided tour basis, with tours being conducted mostly in small groups and given by representatives of the city of Le Havre. The recreated apartment museum is presented to visitors almost as a show home, which plays on its origins as a model “appartement-type”, reminiscent of the format of an estate agent-led house viewing. Visitors are not presented with rigid historical narratives as part of a formalised pedagogy, but rather they are given time after the tour to explore and interact with the space at their own pace. Unlike traditional “do not touch” museums, visitors are actively encouraged to look behind doors and open cupboards according to their own free will. This element of personal choice regarding participation enables those visitors without first-hand experience of the 1950s to interact fully with the different spaces of the site. It also allows visitors to determine the process and dynamics of remembering and potentially allows for a deeper engagement with everyday life in the 1950s, as visitors single out those narratives and objects to which they better relate. Parent and child visitors, for instance, invariably head to the main children’s bedroom where children can try out the Marcel Gascoin three-position stool (which “grows” with children when rotated) or play with the rocking horse. Visitors are able to attach their own experiences and memories to the site and the visit and invest them with meaning.

The artefacts exhibited in the apartment are material sites of memory in their own right as emblematic objects of French 1950s design and cultural markers of the national consumption boom, such as mass-produced, modular furniture, the Frigidaire refrigerator, and brightly-coloured Duralex crockery. Other objects and ensembles pertain to much more localized memories of the 1950s. At a time when only twenty-six per cent of French households had indoor toilets and only ten per cent a bath or shower, the apartment’s indoor bathroom fittings and furniture seem to confirm the narrative told at the museum and in accompanying publications of Le Havre as an architecture and design exception in the 1950s.\textsuperscript{32} Although artefacts on display in the apartment are, in a Baudrillardian sense, ‘by-gone objects’\textsuperscript{33} because they no longer have any other purpose than to signal the passage of time since the 1950s, the way that they are exhibited as part of a re-creation of everyday life serves to re-inscribe meaning into the commonplaceness of their usage. The way that many towns and cities throughout France, notable examples of which are Sotteville-lès-Rouen (Haute-Normandie) and Boulogne-sur-Mer (Nord-Pas-de-Calais). Boulogne also has the label Ville d’art et d’histoire and has a dedicated architectural, urban, and landscape protection zone which contains much of the reconstruction architecture, suggesting a growing recognition of it. It seems, however, that the intention to fully memorialize postwar urbanist architecture that has rendered the city centre of Le Havre a site of memory is not currently present in Boulogne (perhaps because other aspects of Boulogne’s architectural heritage play a larger role in the cultural memory and identity of the city, such as the twelfth century belfry, which has shared UNESCO world heritage site status and the château, which houses an important art and archaeology museum).

\textsuperscript{31} Liberation, for instance, was arguably the most distressing part of the Second World War for the inhabitants of Le Havre. See M. L. Roberts, \textit{What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France} (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2013), pp. 1–4.


they are then able to be re-experienced by visitors through sensory functions of touch and smell, recalling the haptic function of all everyday objects, means that the materiality of memory work is no longer rooted in the past, but rather in the present. The exhibition of certain items of furniture in the apartment stems from a desire to memorialize the largely-forgotten designers who created the objects (as well as the objects themselves), such as Marcel Gascoin (who was born in Le Havre) and René Gabriel. It is significant that nearly all the secondary literature about these two designers has emerged since the first public recognition of Le Havre’s city centre architectural heritage in the early 2000s, and particularly since the establishment of the Appartement témoin Perret in 2006. This suggests that sites of memory are not necessarily always formed from the force of remembering but, contrastingly, to stem the tide of forgetting: in this case, the prevention of cultural amnesia regarding some of the pioneers of French 1950s design.

Museum der 50er Jahre

The Museum der 50er Jahre is a private museum located in the port of Bremerhaven, dedicated to the exhibition of the everyday culture and cultural history of the 1950s. The museum adopts a thematic approach to the exhibition of some twenty thousand objects, conveying the West German Alltag (everyday life) through recreated private and public spaces. The flyer advertising the museum explains that visitors will be immersed in the atmosphere of the Wirtschaftswunder years, and, like in the Appartement témoin Perret, it is this narrative of progress and modernity during the 1950s – of kidney-shaped tables and cone lamps, parties and petticoats, coach trips to Italy, musical comedies featuring the Austrian entertainer Peter Alexander, Starmix food blenders, Bosch refrigerators, and BMW Isetta bubble cars – which has been popularized in subsequent cultural representations of the period that dominates in the museum. Reflecting the style and design of 1950s products and goods, as well as the consumption patterns of an increasingly affluent postwar society, the 1950s are presented as a golden age for West Germans who considered themselves better off economically and socially than they had ever been before. This historical narrative is not prescriptive, as the museum acknowledges in a wall text that it is impossible to exhibit the 1950s per se (because experiences, memories, and impressions of the period are different for each visitor), and is presented rather as one interpretation of 1950s living, work, and free time arrangements. The museum is posited as a memorial “Knoten im Taschentuch” (knot tied in a handkerchief), designed to elicit memories and responses from visitors by means of reflective memory work, rather than impart historical narratives through formal didacticism. In so doing the museum recognizes that a number of complementary and conflicting memories coexist for the 1950s, thus producing a site of memories in the plural rather than the singular.

Overly nostalgic representations of the 1950s, which fail to engage with the dark side of a seemingly colourful period of German history, are challenged within the museum’s interpretive framework. The text cites Ralph Giordano’s concept of the 1950s as a zweite Schuld (second guilt), as a reminder of the necessity to keep not only the memory of the National Socialist period alive – National Socialist crimes constituting the “first guilt” – but also that of the postwar forgetting of National Socialist crimes. The aim of the museum is, therefore, to establish a site that critically explores the 1950s Alltag as a period in which many Germans retreated into the domestic

35 R. Giordano, Die zweite Schuld: oder Von der Last Deutscher zu sein, 2nd ed. (Cologne: KiWi, 2008).
consumption of the *Wirtschaftswunder* because they were reluctant to engage with the National Socialist past. This is continued throughout the museum in the form of short wall texts that respond critically to the installations and situate everyday experiences of the 1950s within the discourse of postwar Holocaust and Second World War memory repression. These texts serve to break temporal continuity in the museum, encouraging visitors to undertake reflective memory work from the vantage point of the present by exploring the legacy of National Socialism in the postwar period and in present-day unified Germany. As such, the museum not only engages with the 1950s as a site of memory of everyday life and culture of the *Wirtschaftswunder*, but also as a site of forgetting the National Socialist past.

The temporal signification of the 1950s as a somewhat blinkered launch into the *Wirtschaftswunder* is accompanied by the universal narrative of the postwar period as heavily Americanized. The strong cultural influence of America is thematized in the museum through the presence of iconic figures of popular culture, such as Elvis Presley and advertising for American goods and products, including Coca Cola. An accompanying museum text encourages visitors to contemplate the way of life borrowed from the USA, expressed particularly in domains such as dress, appearance, and behaviour. Exhibition content about America is strengthened spatially by the museum’s setting and location, which, like in Le Havre, creates the effect of a more localized site of memory within a larger, external site of memory. The museum is housed in a former post chapel that was built in the early 1950s in the US Military Staging Area (renamed Carl Schurz Kasernen in 1973) of Bremerhaven-Weddewarden for use by members of the US Armed Forces, and as such, the architecture provides an “authentic” setting for the museum space and exhibition content. The building and surrounding area memorializes the 1950s both temporally, as a product and act of cultural memory of the period in its own right, and culturally, as a connection to the highly visible American presence in Bremerhaven during the postwar period. Just as Bremerhaven had acquired the nickname ‘Vorort von New York’ (suburb of New York) in the nineteenth century as the departure point of over seven million Germans to America (now memorialized in the German Emigration Centre in Bremerhaven), the sheer volume and impact of Americans in Bremerhaven in the 1950s led the Staging Area (and later the Kasernen) to be known colloquially as “klein Amerika” (little America). This forged a strong bond between Bremerhaven and the US military. The museum building is equally significant as a site of memory attesting to the Americanization of the whole of West Germany. Bremerhaven was the sole US Army Port of Embarkation for all army, navy, marine corps, and air force personnel (including Johnny Cash and Elvis Presley) entering West Germany from the end of the Second World War onwards. Between 1947 and 1957, more than ten million tons of goods, three and a half million people, and almost two hundred thousand private vehicles passed through Bremerhaven en-route to main military bases further south. Bremerhaven became the gateway to the rest of West Germany. Along with the museum’s self-proclaimed “GI baby” curator, the building is thus a direct product of the postwar German-American cultural encounter and helps to support localized place memories as a spatial site of memory.

Material objects on display in the museum serve to reinforce the American-inspired style and design of the 1950s consumption boom. Emblematic objects of furniture of the period that have


37 ‘Die Amerikaner in Bremerhaven: Teil 1 – Der Ursprung’.
become sites of memory of the *Wirtschaftswunder*, such as the *Nierentisch* (kidney-shaped, three-legged table), *Tütenlampe* (lamp with cone-shaped shades), and *Cocktailsessel* (cocktail chair) convey a sense of the 1950s past through aesthetic form and as cultural mediators of the contexts of manufacture and use in which they initially originated. As part of recreated scenes of everyday life, such objects have the ability to trigger sensory memories, despite the museum operating a “no-touch policy”. For people with first-hand experience of 1950s objects, items of furniture like the *Nierentisch* act as repositories of family experiences and memories often linked to the impracticality of design objects in domestic settings. For those with no first-hand experience of 1950s objects, the exhibition of items of furniture (none more so than the *Nierentisch*) links back to the narrative of the *Wirtschaftswunder* that has been retrospectively created in cultural representations of the period. This provides a means for visitors to access their own memories or reconstructions of the 1950s West German *Alltag* and compare those to the museal narratives on offer at the site. The specifically local connection to the city and the surrounding area is made through some of the ensembles exhibited, such as the bar, jukebox, and records taken from the well-known Bremen pub *Zum Tuschkasten*. Due to space restrictions, the majority of local ensembles remain in the museum’s depot, but the exhibition of a select number of familiar, local establishments may serve to sustain localized place memories. These, together with sensory, involuntary memories evoked through the playing of 1950s music, helps to create a stronger connection to the past than would otherwise be available at the site and a memorial environment in which memory work may be triggered.

**Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR**

The Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR (DOK) is a public museum in the centre of Eisenhüttenstadt that documents everyday culture and life in the former East Germany. It comprises a permanent and temporary exhibition on the GDR *Alltag*, and between 2008 and 2012, also included a 1957 historic apartment situated a few streets away from the main museum site. By focusing on the GDR *Alltag*, the DOK challenges pejorative post-unification responses to the GDR as an unconstitutional Stasi-state by seeking to rewrite forgotten memories of everyday experiences of the GDR into German cultural memory. The museum constitutes a site of memory based on a will to memorialize and narrate this forgotten everyday “normality” through professional museum work. The museum differs significantly from the other two case study museums discussed in this article because it is not devoted explicitly to the exhibition of 1950s everyday culture, but rather that of the whole period of the GDR (1949-90). Indeed, it is significant that there is currently no 1950s museum *per se* in the whole of eastern Germany. The 1950s are remembered at the DOK, but constitute a site of memory based on the fusion of personal experience and memory with political memory only as one part of the whole forty-year story of the GDR. The GDR *Alltag* is organised around ten thematic

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39 The *Nierentisch*, for instance, is often remembered as a highly impractical piece of postwar design: the three-legged structure makes for uneven weight distribution once something is actually placed on one end of the table.

40 The permanent exhibition at the DOK is at present still open to the public but all professional museum work has been discontinued pending further notice due to funding cuts. All references to the historic apartment were correct at the time of writing.

41 The only exceptions to this are the 17 June 1953 uprising and 1950s interior décor. Neither of these features prominently in the current permanent exhibition but they were directly thematized in two temporary
sections in the permanent exhibition, linked by a chronological timeline, in which aspects of everyday life of GDR citizens are seamlessly merged with those of the GDR’s institutions of power, situating GDR everyday experience within the context of its political history. This is echoed in the historic apartment, which although a direct attempt to portray 1950s GDR domestic life, is still ultimately presented within the wider narrative of socialist new town construction in a bid to “construct [aufbauen] socialism”\(^{42}\) in the 1950s. A wall text in the apartment, for instance, reminds visitors that the apartment is located on Eisenhüttenstadt’s Straße der Republik, ‘the town’s most important East-West axis’. Unlike in France and western Germany where the 1950s are emerging as a particularly important site of memory, the 1950s in eastern Germany seem to be largely subsumed into the wider cultural memory of the former East German state. The GDR no longer exists, and as such, the usual boundaries that define temporal experiences of everyday life such as decades, are blurred to form one meta-narrative of GDR experience. Paradoxically, therefore, GDR museums such as the DOK can be seen as sites of memory par excellence according to Nora because they are deliberately created as the archives and storehouses of mythicized and historicized memories, since real, authentic milieux de mémoire (environments of memory) no longer exist for the GDR.

The confinement of the 1950s to the historical narrative of the whole GDR period is perhaps surprising given the significance of the 1950s in the cultural memory and identity of Eisenhüttenstadt. The town was founded in 1950 as a residential area accompanying the Eisenhüttenkombinat Ost steel mill and was named Stalinstadt in 1953 in order to commemorate Stalin’s death.\(^{43}\) The town was subsequently developed throughout the 1950s as ‘Germany’s first socialist town’, going on to become a successful industrial town with a steadily-increasing population until the late 1980s.\(^{44}\) Eisenhüttenstadt still bears the strong architectural stamp of the 1950s and represents a unique contribution to German architectural heritage, as over twenty-two acres of residential complexes now have listed status, making Eisenhüttenstadt’s town centre the largest continuous historical building and conservation area in Germany.\(^{45}\) However, where such a significant architectural heritage could form the basis of a re-imagined civic pride and identity as in Le Havre, Eisenhüttenstadt’s 1950s architecture is yet to find widespread public recognition and appreciation. For over a decade, the city of Eisenhüttenstadt has been engaged in a large-scale restructuring and renovation project, aimed at re-urbanizing its city centre through the conversion

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\(^{42}\) This phrase was commonly used in reference to the SED’s (the ruling party of the GDR) programme of political, economic and social changes, known as the *Aufbau des Sozialismus*, announced at the Second Party Conference in July 1952.

\(^{43}\) The town was originally destined to be named after the revolutionary Karl Marx but Stalin’s sudden death made memorializing the Soviet Union’s former leader a priority and the town was quickly named Stalinstadt (Chemnitz thereby receiving the name Karl-Marx-Stadt). The town was renamed Eisenhüttenstadt in 1961 following official de-Stalinization. In order to eliminate confusion, in this article the town will simply be referred to as Eisenhüttenstadt pre- and post-1961.

\(^{44}\) At its peak in the late 1980s, Eisenhüttenstadt’s population reached over fifty thousand inhabitants (compared to around thirty thousand today). A. Ludwig, *Eisenhüttenstadt: Wandel einer industriellen Gründungsstadt in fünfzig Jahren* (Potsdam: Brandenburgische Landeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2000), p. 84.

\(^{45}\) This area includes the DOK’s main museum building in Erich-Weinert-Allee and the apartment block in which the historic apartment is situated in Straße der Republik. ‘Flächendenkmal Friedrich-Engels-Straße’, Brandenburg.de, accessed 6 August 2013, http://www.lbv.brandenburg.de/1161_1208.htm.
and modernization of between three thousand five hundred and four thousand apartments. Most of these apartments were constructed in the 1950s and 1960s as part of the establishment of residential areas Wohnkomplex I to IV and are now under listed status. Whereas 1950s apartments in Le Havre have come to symbolize the architectural progress of the postwar period, 1950s apartments in Eisenhüttenstadt have come to epitomize the limitations of GDR housing construction, now often being too small and basic to meet the requirements of contemporary consumers. The current status of 1950s architecture in Eisenhüttenstadt thus seems to confirm the view that was dominant in the immediate post-unification period of the GDR as a backward Mangelwirtschaft (shortage economy). Although a renaissance of GDR architecture is taking place in cities such as Berlin (where it is increasingly identified by the younger generations in the realm of retro-chic), it seems that in visibly socialist towns like Eisenhüttenstadt, there is still an uneasy association of GDR architecture with the failures and shortcomings of the centrally-planned state.

Amidst the large-scale renovation of Eisenhüttenstadt’s town centre, the DOK’s 1950s apartment and main museum building appear to be historical remnants of a way of life now defunct in post-unification Germany. The three-bedroom historic apartment is recreated as authentically as possible to show the typical living arrangements of a family living and working in the model socialist town in the late 1950s. The museum’s permanent and temporary exhibitions are housed in a former GDR nursery and kindergarten, which was built between 1953 and 1954 to serve Wohnkomplex II. Such services were essential to GDR ideology and economic success but, according to a wall text in the historic apartment, particularly critical for day-to-day life in Eisenhüttenstadt in the 1950s because seventy-two per cent of women were in work and children made up almost a quarter of the population. Cultural markers of the building’s former use are still visible in the customer service and exhibition spaces, such as the 1954-55 lead-glazed stained glass windows in the stairway depicting “scenes of the life of children” by one of the best-known East German Socialist Realist artists Walter Womacka. The buildings are important as products and acts of cultural memory of 1950s Eisenhüttenstadt but, because of the museum’s central narrative of the forty-year story of the GDR, they are largely memorialized as sites of memory of the GDR’s early socialist Alltag in general. That this story is told through architectural, historical “eye-witnesses” to the GDR past serves to strengthen the memorial connection to exhibition content and create an “authentic” memorial environment which encourages active memory work.

Alongside the spatial, memory work is encouraged at the DOK through the material. Like the collections of the other case study museums, emblematic objects of 1950s design on display in the historic apartment, such as mass-produced wooden furniture, a Tütenlampe, and a three table Nierentisch attest to a narrativization of the 1950s as a period of interior design progress. Similarly, the exhibition of luxury material objects such as authentic indoor bathroom fittings and a refrigerator seem to confirm the view that residents of such apartments in the 1950s enjoyed increased domestic comfort and higher standards of living, despite the view of the GDR as a backward Mangelwirtschaft. This particular narrative is not extended to the whole of the GDR of the 1950s, however, or even that of the majority of the residents of Eisenhüttenstadt. As in Le Havre, such apartments were extremely expensive and thus typically out of reach financially of most.

families. Unlike in the permanent exhibition where many objects are displayed in cases, visitors are able to freely interact with the space and objects within it, sitting on the living room sofa and opening the kitchen cupboards. As at the Appartement témoin Perret, this free interaction with the artefacts allows for a less prescriptive pattern of remembrance and potentially for a deeper engagement with the apartment as a site of memory because visitors are able to focus on those particular objects and narratives of interest to them.

The exhibition of material objects in the main museum building takes place in a markedly different way to that in the historic apartment and centres on more traditional museum interpretation. Objects are included as part of formal thematic displays on various aspects of the GDR Alltag and are supported by textual information, video footage, and photographs that situate the experiences of individuals living in the GDR within the wider narrative of the state’s history. The incorporation of highly personal “memory icons”, such as photographs, into the display allows for a potentially greater capacity for organic memory work pertaining to the GDR Alltag because such objects serve to enshrine family histories and are ‘invested with the affective imprints’ of historical experiences. Exhibited icons of GDR cultural memory, such as the much-discussed and debated Töpfchenbank (collective potty training bench) embody the political ideology of the SED regime and serve to act as cultural mediators of everyday life in the GDR. By adopting a layering of interpretation strategies, which is now common in many museums, the exhibition makes use of an audio guide and audio stations located throughout the exhibition. These play excerpts of recorded interviews with former GDR citizens about material objects on display, as well as personal experiences of everyday life. Together with the other personal artefacts on display, these play an important role in combining emotions, senses, and memories as ‘vital components’ of the visiting experience, creating what Gaynor Kavanagh has termed ‘dream spaces’ for visitors’ personal expression, recollection, and reflection within the public framework of the museum. By incorporating these first-hand testimonies, communicative memories of former GDR citizens are becoming part of the exhibition narrative, and are thereby ingrained as cultural memories against which visitors are able to test their own experiences, memories, or preconceptions of the GDR. Whilst visitors are not able to experience the haptic function of the artefacts as they are in the historic apartment, the audio material provides a way for visitors to engage directly in memory work centred on the everyday material culture of the GDR, enabling a quasi-experience of the materiality of memory. This enables the objects to be re-experienced in the present, even by those visitors who have no first-hand experience of the GDR.

47 Unlike in the Appartement témoin Perret, this shortcoming is acknowledged in a wall text in the historic apartment. Most visitors are thus well aware that the Alltag-narrative on offer is highly selective.
49 The Töpfchenbank has become one of the most well-known symbols of the GDR education system. In 1999, a picture of East German children sitting on a Töpfchenbank was included in criminologist Christian Pfeiffer’s controversial Spiegel article ‘Anleitung zum Haß’ about the link between institutional child-rearing and GDR education and post-unification racism and xenophobia in the eastern Länder. This sparked a much wider debate about the role of GDR socialisation versus the significance of situational factors in the creation of a distinct eastern identity.
Conclusion: Towards a Plurality of Sites and Memories
Exploring the ways that the 1950s past is remembered at the three case study museums has revealed some of the memorial complexities of the museums as sites of memory. The different ways in which the 1950s are represented in the three sites, in terms of both exhibition content and presentation, suggests that memorialized incarnations of the period are as varied as the very memories and experiences which initially characterized and shaped everyday life in France and Germany in the postwar period. These include providing an immersive, seemingly historically “authentic” experience which encourages visitor participation, as is the case in the Appartement témoin and the DOK’s historic apartment; creating a self-reflexive environment for critical personal reflection, as is promoted in the Museum der 50er Jahre; and providing a multimodal interface for the negotiation of official, sanctioned histories, and personal memories, as takes place in the DOK’s permanent exhibition. Conveying the past at different semantic levels through a multiple layering of sites that co-exist and feed into one another as part of a network of memory of the 1950s (including the temporal, spatial and material), the museums represent privileged sites of memory where remembrance is encouraged and sustained. Whilst the museums employ a variety of interpretive strategies and media to fulfil this, such as using guided tours, enabling visitors to handle objects, incorporating first-hand testimony in the form of audio material, and posing critical questions through wall texts, they are all united in laying claim to a unique, more localized narrative of the 1950s. The museums thus provide a means of refocusing on the wider French, West German and East German national experiences of the 1950s through the local lens, highlighting, in particular, reconstruction architecture, Americanization, and everyday life in a socialist new town respectively.

As the museums highlight, however, sites of memory are simultaneously determined by processes of forgetting, as museum and heritage practitioners are concerned with reframing dominant (often state-centred) historical narratives and reclaiming forgotten or delegitimized narratives. As part of a wider heritigization of the 1950s in Le Havre, the Appartement témoin Perret seeks to reinscribe its marginalized postwar city centre architecture and the forgotten pioneers of French 1950s design into French cultural memory, using it as a basis for a new sense of local identity and civic pride. The DOK and historische Wohnung engage in a similar process of reactivating and revaluing memories of the East German Alltag as a way of countering pejorative, “top-down” post-unification narratives of the GDR. For the Museum der 50er Jahre, the concept of forgetting necessarily underpins much of the museum’s narrativization of postwar history and memory. It sets up the 1950s as a period in which West Germans bought into the mythology of the Wirtschaftswunder as a means of social and cultural escapism from the Second World War and the National Socialist past. Rather than being antonymous counterparts, remembering and forgetting are part of the same mnemonic mechanism and constitute dynamic processes at the sites, which serve to invest and divest the past of meaning. As such, the extent to which aspects of the 1950s past are remembered or forgotten depends on the way in which the sites are appropriated spatially and materially by curators and visitors.

Although all three museums are to some extent prescriptive in the versions of the past they narrate, the recognition of the possibility of multiple (and perhaps conflicting) narratives and the way in which the responsibility of remembering is encouraged to be undertaken by the individual visitor through self-reflective memory work, suggests an increasingly fluid understanding of what it means to remember the past at museums. If, as Nora argues, sites of memory only come about because of the replacement of an authentic, naturally-occurring social memory with an
artificial one, museums seem only to continue to hold relevance for people as memorial cornerstones because of the subsequent reversal of this phenomenon. A glance in the museums’ visitor books provides a snapshot of the multifarious ways in which people are prompted to respond to historical narratives on offer, and shows that memories are constantly shaped, exchanged, altered, and constructed anew by the fluid interaction between people, objects, and narratives. This, together with the role that museums play within memory communities in creating and sustaining local as well as national identities results in them becoming not repositories of historicized memory, as Nora suggests, but rather sites of active, organic memory work.

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