

Decolonial Activism and Spatial Transformation in Berlin

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Abstract

This paper expands on research in memory activism and decolonial urban transformation by analyzing artistic and activist reinterpretations of Berlin's colonial monuments, focusing in particular on the Bismarck Monument and the Humboldt Forum. While prior scholarship has centered on the historical and material dimensions of these structures, the transformative role of artistic interventions and decolonial activism in reshaping them into spaces of resistance and co-created memory remains underexplored. Addressing this gap, the research applies Edward Soja's Thirdspace model (1996), drawing on discourse analysis, spatial mapping, and digital ethnography. Artistic projects and decolonial activities (protests, performances, etc.) are examined as critical interventions that generate counter-memories and reconfigure urban space through embodied performance, dialogue, and collaborative engagement. By tracing how these practices transform colonial monuments into contested, lived Thirdspaces, this study contributes to critical urban geography and decolonial studies, foregrounding spatial justice and collective memory formation in the postcolonial city.

Introduction

As a city built on multiple historical layers, Berlin serves as a center for decolonial activism which seeks to dismantle colonial power traces present within the city's spaces. Recent movements led by grassroots organizations alongside artists and academics focus on transforming colonial monuments and other contested sites into spaces for discussion and transformation through resistance (Pinder, 2005). This study explores the transformation of Berlin's public memory through decolonial activism which uses co-creative methods to contest established historical narratives while promoting inclusive urban environments.

Decolonial activism within this framework represents joint initiatives dedicated to the destruction of ongoing colonial frameworks and narratives in modern society. This activism operates within the framework of decoloniality developed by Walter D. Mignolo and Aníbal Quijano¹ to challenge colonial legacies while creating knowledge spaces and cultural interactions that transcend colonial influences (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018; Quijano, Mignolo, Segato, and Walsh, 2024). Through their interventions decolonial activists in Berlin convert colonial monuments and institutions from oppressive symbols to active sites for critical exploration and alternative stories.

The core idea of this research involves decolonial space which defines both physical and symbolic sites where colonial legacies undergo active contestation and reinterpretation. These spaces serve as resistance sites where activists and artists use multiple tactics such as protests and educational programs along with artistic installations to dispute mainstream historical interpretations. Activists and artists generate alternative narratives that reshape collective memories by adding new interpretations to existing colonial structures.

Co-Creation

Co-creation functions as a joint meaning-making process which brings together activists, artists, local communities and scholars to transform contested spaces. Through critical engagement with colonial monuments co-creation introduces new perspectives that reflect the experiences of marginalized communities instead of removing these structures. This participatory approach challenges traditional top-down narratives and fosters a more democratic form of public history. Beyond formal protest, co-creation in this study also includes dialogic interventions such as counter-tours and collaborative art-making, everyday spatial practices like gathering, resting, or performing in exclusionary spaces, and ephemeral acts that symbolically re-inscribe public memory through slogans, banners, and

performances. Crucially, these spaces of resistance also become spaces of belonging, especially for diasporic and immigrant communities with lived or inherited experiences of colonization, where collective mourning and resistance create shared purpose and a sense of home. In this way, the urban landscape is reimagined as a living archive, responsive to the multicultural and postcolonial dynamics of the contemporary city.

In this paper, co-creation is understood not only as collaborative artistic production among activist groups but as a broader participatory ethos that includes bystanders, local communities, and even institutional actors. The “co” signals a processual and relational mode of spatial authorship, where memory is not imposed but continually negotiated. Through such shared engagement, public space becomes a site of plural storytelling, where counter-histories and collective futures can be imagined side by side.

Case Studies

The paper focuses on two emblematic sites of colonial memory in Berlin: the Humboldt Forum and the Bismarck Monument². Both are central to the city’s colonial urban fabric, yet they differ in architectural form, institutional function, and modes of public engagement. The Humboldt Forum stands as a state-funded endeavour to reinterpret imperial history through cultural programming and curated narratives inside the restored former Prussian palace structure. The Bismarck Monument³ stands as an untouched monument from 19th-century imperial Germany which represents a lasting symbol of national memory. These two monuments together offer a comparative framework for analyzing how Berlin’s monument landscape today displays colonial histories through space and discourse. But before we delve into the analysis section, let me clarify why both of these sites have been termed monuments in the title and throughout the paper.

Monuments are often seen as grand, lasting structures that commemorate people, events, or ideals - anchoring dominant historical narratives and projecting permanence (Stevens et al., 2012). While the term “monumental” evokes significance and scale, its Latin root *monēre* - to remind or warn - reveals a deeper function: monuments not only honor (Ehrenmal) or commemorate (Denkmal), but also admonish (Mahnmal), urging reflection and responsibility.

Not all sites of memory are formally recognized as monuments, yet they may still function monumentally. The Humboldt Forum, though not a heritage-listed structure, evokes imperial grandeur and occupies symbolic space at the heart of Berlin. As a reconstructed palace, it projects colonial

memory and reinforces national narratives, operating as a site of ideological power despite lacking official monument status.

Therefore, the Humboldt Forum becomes an ideal subject for this study, not in spite of, but because of its ambiguous status. Its monumental presence without official monumentality blurs the boundaries between museum, memorial, and political symbol, illustrating the tensions inherent in urban memory-making. In parallel, the Bismarck Monument serves as a more traditional and explicit example of imperial commemoration, towering physically and ideologically over Berlin's public space. These two sites, among the most frequented colonial landmarks by visitors to Berlin - one a reconstructed palace-turned-cultural center, the other a literal statue of colonial power - allow for a comparative exploration of how decolonial activism intervenes across different scales and forms of urban memory.

Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on Edward Soja's *Thirdspace* theory to examine how decolonial activism transforms Berlin's colonial monuments into dynamic arenas of contestation and co-creation (Soja, 1996). Soja's spatial triad offers a layered understanding of space: Firstspace refers to the tangible elements of our surroundings, such as buildings or monuments in this case; Secondspace deals with the symbolic meanings and ideological narratives connected to the physical spaces such as colonial pride or national identity; and Thirdspace develops from actual lived experiences which contest or reinterpret dominant narratives through protests, performances, or creative interventions. The framework shows us that historical sites are not static relics but are continually transformed through engagement, becoming spaces of resistance, negotiation, and reimagining.

Thirdspace extends beyond material and representational space by demonstrating how lived experiences and resistance contribute to evolving meanings of space over time. While some may question the continued relevance of a theory developed in the 1990s - particularly in light of more recent approaches emphasizing digital spatialities, affect theory, or urban infrastructure, these newer frameworks often overlook the grounded, relational negotiations that are central to co-creation and decolonial praxis.

Thirdspace thus remains uniquely well-suited to this study's aims. It provides a critical lens to trace how colonial-era spaces become sites of symbolic resistance, counter-memory, and negotiated belonging - key dynamics in processes of co-creation within the contemporary city. By illuminating how colonial legacies persist in built form but are continually

re-scripted through public engagement, Thirdspace is essential for understanding co-created memoryscapes (Macdonald, 2013) in urban life today.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative and interdisciplinary methodology to understand how decolonial activism reclaims and transforms colonial urban landmarks in Berlin. It combines archival research, discourse analysis, and digital ethnography to trace both historical narratives and contemporary interventions at key sites like the Humboldt Forum. Informed by Edward Soja's *Thirdspace* theory, the study maps how official space and lived space collide to produce contested geographies of memory.

However traditional historical or architectural approaches often focus solely on state-sanctioned narratives or material structures, neglecting how publics engage, disrupt, or reimagine space through activism. Such approaches also fail to capture the dynamic and symbolic layering introduced by grassroots movements and migrant communities.

For this reason, this methodology centers activist cartographies, protest ephemera, performance traces, and online critiques - including blogs, podcasts, and participatory tours - as vital sources. Field visits and spatial analysis of protest sites help visualize how co-created memory emerges outside, around, and even within institutional borders. By mapping both curated and counter-routes through and around the Forum, this research highlights how urban space becomes an arena of negotiation, resistance, and shared meaning-making, aligning with the broader theme of co-creation in cities.

Its continued use in critical urban studies and decolonial scholarship speaks to its robustness, especially when examining cities not only as sites of governance and infrastructure but as arenas of lived contestation and co-produced futures.

Analysis

While the two chosen cases are distinct in form and context, they are analyzed through the same spatial framework - Edward Soja's triadic model of Firstspace, Secondspace, and Thirdspace - which allows for a comparative understanding of how spatial power, representation, and resistance unfold. Rather than repeating the theoretical framing for each site, this section explores each spatial dimension thematically across both cases, enabling a clearer view of their contrasts and intersections.

Firstspace: Materiality and Official Function

The Humboldt Forum and the Bismarck Monument each play significant roles in Berlin's urban and monument landscape. They serve as significant physical markers of Germany's colonial history. Their forms and institutional functions lay a foundation for understanding how colonial power is displayed spatially within the city. It also showcases how these sites continue to influence public memory and urban contestation.

The Humboldt Forum is an architectural reconstruction of the Berlin Palace, a symbolic representation of Prussian imperial power. The grand Baroque façade, alongside its massive size and position on the Museum Island, creates a lasting impression of Germany's imperial past. The Forum's purpose as a cultural institution dedicated to intercultural exchange and examining Germany's colonial past faces criticism because its reconstruction promotes colonial nostalgia while failing to adequately confront colonial legacies (Larios, 2020; Bishara, 2020; Klinkenberg, 2021). The central position of The Forum in Berlin's museum district, as well as its large size, boosts its symbolic authority in a way that aligns it with major institutions such as the Pergamon Museum, which also receives criticism for its colonial-themed exhibits. Despite its modernized design elements, such as the glass walkways and contemporary exhibition spaces, the Humboldt Forum's architectural restoration reflects a longing for Prussian imperial splendor rather than a critical reassessment of imperial history (Oltermann, 2022). Yet its scale, central location, and decorative symbolism - including imperial motifs - signal an enduring nostalgia for Prussian power and Germany's colonial past. Activists argue that the Forum's location at Berlin's core reinforces the narratives of Germany's colonial history that it desperately tries to avoid. Thus, the Forum serves as a Firstspace which sustains colonial ideologies through its physical presence, even though it claims to promote postcolonial discussions.

Likewise, the Bismarck Monument acts as a lasting representation of Germany's imperial legacy. The monument, built in 1901, honors Otto von Bismarck, whose policies, among others, paved the way for Germany's imperial expansion. The monument's 15-meter height and the imposing figure of Bismarck, adorned in military uniform and surrounded by allegorical sculptures of power, emphasize his role in shaping German nationalism and imperialism (Landesdenkmalamt Berlin, 2024). The monument's physical prominence in Berlin's Tiergarten district positions it as an enduring symbol of the nation's imperial past. At the monument's base, the inclusion of allegorical figures - such as Atlas holding a globe and an Egyptian sphinx - serves to underscore Bismarck's role in European colonial

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activities, particularly during the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, which divided Africa among colonial powers (Sharma, 2018). Yet, the monument lacks a nuanced representation of the violence and exploitation associated with Bismarck's imperial policies. Today, the Bismarck Monument remains largely unaltered, maintained by the city's heritage preservation authorities without significant critical intervention or reinterpretation. This material presence unchallenged by contextual historical information, makes it a site that commemorates German imperial achievements without addressing the violent legacies of those actions (Massey, 2005)

Both sites - through their architectural design and public positioning - embody the power of Firstspace to reflect and reinforce dominant historical narratives. The Humboldt Forum's reconstruction of the Berlin Palace reasserts the symbolism of imperial power in the heart of Berlin's cultural district, while the Bismarck Monument stands as a towering tribute to the founder of the German Empire. Despite their distinct functions - one as a museum of cultural exchange, the other as a monumental commemoration - their material forms continue to sustain colonial memory by anchoring public space in a past that is both imperial and exclusionary. As such, these spaces serve as Firstspaces where contested colonial histories are not merely remembered, but also spatially embodied, asserting their ongoing presence in the urban environment.

Secondspace: Symbolic Narratives and Curated Histories

The Secondspace of the Humboldt Forum and the Bismarck Monument refers to the symbolic meanings and historical narratives embedded in these sites. Both monuments, while vastly different in their material forms, serve as vessels for national memory, ideological messaging, and colonial symbolism. The curatorial frameworks that surround these sites shape how the public engages with and interprets their histories, and in turn, reveal the contested ways in which colonial legacies are negotiated in the present. The ways these monuments present these symbols - through design, and institutional rhetoric - inform the public's understanding of Germany's historical legacy, particularly regarding nationalism, empire, and the ongoing process of decolonization.

The Humboldt Forum: Ideological Messaging and Curatorial Intentions

The Humboldt Forum's Secondspace is shaped by a state-sanctioned narrative that attempts - but ultimately fails - to critically reckon with Germany's colonial past. While the institution presents itself as a site of intercultural dialogue and historical reflection, its reconstructed imperial architecture

- most notably the Prussian dome, lantern, and golden cross - signals continuity with imperial ideologies (DW, 2020; Klinkenberg, 2021). These design choices reinforce the symbolic authority of monarchy, Christianity, and European dominance, embedding colonial nostalgia into the very structure of the building. As a reconstruction of a royal palace, the Forum echoes the glorification of empire and colonialism, even as it purports to offer critical engagement with that history (Bommers, 2022; Stan, 2022; Dorgerloh, 2021; Grenier and Hucal, 2021; Pawlata, 2024; Stadtmuseum Berlin, 2024).

The institution's exhibitions and cultural programming position it as a space for confronting Germany's colonial past, yet many activists argue that the representation of non-Western perspectives remains marginal and insufficient (Larios, 2020). The Forum's curatorial language further reflects a Eurocentric worldview: although non-European artifacts are displayed, they are frequently framed through Western categories such as science, civilization, and progress - obscuring the violent colonial processes through which many objects were acquired. The Forum's neutral display of colonial-era objects including human remains seized during Germany's colonial rule obscures their violent origins which demonstrates a disconnect between its declared decolonial mission and actual curatorial practice (Heller and Pablo Nina, 2023). Attempts to introduce postcolonial critique - such as through selected contemporary artworks - often lack depth and integration, appearing tokenistic and ultimately reinforcing, rather than disrupting, dominant narratives (Stan, 2022). Additionally, the institution's naming after the Humboldt brothers - figures closely tied to imperial exploration - further entangles its identity with colonial epistemologies (Dege, 2021).

Although the institution claims to confront Germany's colonial history critically through its practices, opponents claim that building an imperial palace without sufficient historical context preserves colonial structures instead of deconstructing them. Activists point out based on Achille Mbembe and Walter Rodney's critiques that this architectural restoration functions beyond historical commemoration by continuing to uphold present-day colonial power systems (Mbembe, 2019; Rodney, 2018).⁴ The Humboldt Forum represents what Mbembe describes as the "postcolony," because it shows how colonial structures stay intact through rearticulation instead of being eliminated. Together, these elements construct a curated Secondspace that reproduces imperial memory under the guise of critical engagement, sustaining Eurocentric authority within an institution that claims decolonial intent.

“Both, Humboldt Forum and the Bismarck Monument not only materialize imperial memory, but they also become dynamic arenas for decolonial activism.”

The Bismarck Monument: Nationalism, Imperialism, and Absence of Context

In contrast, the Bismarck Monument stands as both a tribute to Otto von Bismarck's work in uniting Germany and as a representation of the expansionist ideologies that drove European imperialism toward the end of the 19th century. The statue celebrates militarism and nationalistic values through allegorical figures that emphasize Bismarck's military power and accomplishments in line with German imperial ambitions. The Landesdenkmalamt Berlin revealed that the monument became part of the National Socialist vision for an imperial "forum of the Empire" which highlighted its ideological connections to imperial and authoritarian state-building projects (Landesdenkmalamt 2021).

Unlike the Humboldt Forum, which has been reconstructed, the Bismarck Monument remains untouched and uncontextualized in curatorial terms. Today, the monument stands as an uncontested relic, with its grand size and imperial symbols buttressing the narratives of national unity and power. This showcases the longstanding and persistent connection between nationalist sentiment and military power, deeply embedded within colonial ideologies. The lack of explanatory signs or alternative historical narratives at the monument demonstrates the ongoing influence of symbolic power in Berlin's collective remembrance. Bismarck's representation as a perfect symbol of national power maintains imperial authority's glorification and state dominance.

Despite the relocation and partial modification over time, this did not result in any significant critical examination of the monument. This curatorial silence allows it to persist as a Secondspace that perpetuates nationalist and imperial ideals. The failure of institutions to respond to activist demands for contextual plaques and educational programming demonstrates how selective memory serves nationalist pride while ignoring colonial violence legacies. This Secondspace, therefore, functions to honor military power and national identity through imperial symbolism while deliberately ignoring the destructive aftermath of colonialism.

Comparative Analysis: The Persistent Ideology of Empire and Nationalism

Both the Humboldt Forum and the Bismarck Monument represent competing narratives of German national identity and history through their association with imperial power. The Secondspace of these sites plays a fundamental role in demonstrating how symbolic messages and national identity remain influenced by past imperial legacies. Despite its role as a critical space for analyzing colonial history the Humboldt Forum's archi-

itecture and exhibitions alongside its name reveal the ongoing impact of imperial values. The Bismarck Monument remains a steadfast representation of imperial pride that perpetuates Germany's military and national glory in contemporary public awareness.

Humboldt Forum's programming aims to decolonize, yet fails institutionally to eliminate imperial narratives which proves how deep-rooted imperial ideologies still affect curatorial methods. On the other hand, the Bismarck Monument stands outside the scope of ongoing discussions and continues to celebrate imperial history without facing any critical scrutiny. Its 2021 restoration without any addition critical educational programming or reflective plaques is a clear example of that.

Ultimately, both sites demonstrate how national monuments function as influential means of ideological communication while preserving imperial and colonial symbols without enough critical examination. The Humboldt Forum's architectural symbolism and imperial imagery of the Bismarck Monument serve to sustain national identity while leaving colonial and imperial history complexities largely unexplored.

Thirdspace: Lived Resistance and Co-Creation

Monuments are often perceived as static structures, anchored in stone and ideology, representing a fixed version of the past. And yet, as Edward Soja's theory of Thirdspace demonstrates, space is never neutral nor settled - it is constantly reshaped through lived experiences, symbolic contestations, and embodied practices (Soja, 1996). The same is applicable to the two cases discussed here. Both, Humboldt Forum and the Bismarck Monument not only materialize imperial memory, but they also become dynamic arenas for decolonial activism. Activists, artists, and scholars have begun transforming these monuments into Thirdspaces: contested zones where dominant narratives are unsettled and plural memories are performed, inscribed, and negotiated.

This section explores how the Humboldt Forum and the Bismarck Monument function not merely as architectural remnants of empire, but as lived arenas of resistance and co-creation. Through artistic intervention, performance, satire, and counter-mapping, both sites are reimagined as spaces where history is not simply remembered - but re-authored.

Humboldt Forum: Co-Creating a Memoryscape-in-Motion

The Humboldt Forum positions itself as a space for cultural dialogue and critical reflection on Germany's colonial past, and it draws on the language of postcolonial engagement in its exhibitions and programming. However, its Baroque reconstruction of the Prussian palace - crowned with a gold-

en cross and saturated with imperial symbolism - reinforces the spatial authority of colonial nostalgia. In response, activist organizations have unified to dispute the Forum's self-portrayal and disrupt its hegemonic framing. The Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum (CCWAH), formed in 2013, directly opposed the Berlin Palace reconstruction, arguing that the project perpetuated imperialist ideologies (Bishara, 2022). Campaigns such as *"I Won't Participate Because..."* encouraged cultural workers to publicly refuse involvement with the Forum, signaling a widespread refusal of complicity. Around the same time, No Humboldt 21! drew explicit links between the Forum's establishment and Germany's colonial history, launching protests and informational campaigns to critique the institution's failure to reckon with its imperial entanglements (No Humboldt 21!, 2013). In 2021, Decolonize Berlin launched the 'Defund the Humboldt Forum!' campaign, demanding that public funding be redirected toward inclusive, community-led cultural spaces (Decolonize Berlin, 2021). These interventions map a critical Thirdspace - not curated by institutions, but co-created through dissent, multilingual slogans, satirical performances, and symbolic refusals.

From its construction phase to its grand opening, the Humboldt Forum became a target of persistent decolonial intervention (Küçük, 2020). Early activist campaigns - employing slogans, banners, and performances - transformed the space into a public stage of critique. This is where Thirdspace becomes palpable: the Forum's Secondspace imaginary, which sought to control meaning through architectural nostalgia and state-sanctioned narratives of "learning," was continually ruptured by Thirdspace practices that rejected this sanitized vision of empire. Posters declaring, *"677 million Euro contribution to the commodification of colonial history,"* or *"I won't participate because you don't listen,"* pierced the Forum's neutral self-image. Activists not only protested the building and its contents but actively subverted its institutional logic. They refused token participation, insisting instead on structural transformation.

This resistance was multilingual and transnational: slogans appeared in English (~65%) and German (~35%), signaling diasporic, BIPOC, and migrant solidarities. The movement was not merely reactive - it was co-creative. Performances included chants like *"What goes up must come down,"* referencing both the palace's reconstructed cross and the broader call to decenter imperial nostalgia. Satirical refusals - *"I won't participate because decolonial discourse happens elsewhere,"* or *"I'm tired of waiting for these collections to decolonize me"* - captured the emotional exhaustion of symbolic inclusion without justice.

Activists targeted multiple spatial and symbolic layers of the site in their interventions. The architecture of the Humboldt Forum - particularly its reconstructed Prussian façades and the golden cross atop the dome - was not viewed as neutral heritage, but rather as a spatial assertion of imperial dominance. Similarly, the collections housed within, including human remains, looted artifacts, and ethnographic displays, were critically reinterpreted through counter-tours and educational materials as instruments of colonial violence. Beyond the physical and curatorial dimensions, the institution itself became a focus of critique. Referencing Audre Lorde's assertion that *"the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house,"* protesters highlighted the fundamental contradiction of attempting to achieve decolonial justice within an imperial framework.

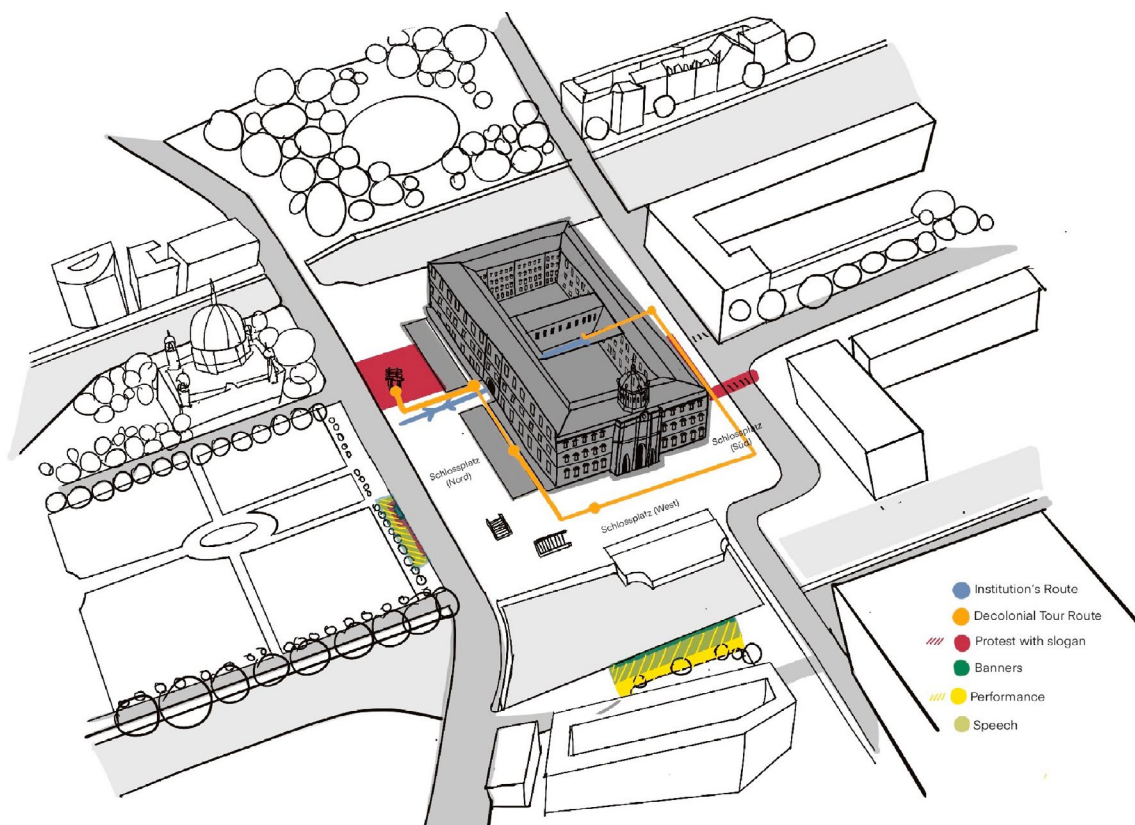


Figure 1. Decolonial Activism Overlay Map of Humboldt Forum, 2025.

Illustration by: Prarthana Narendra Hosadurga

Over time, resistance evolved from street-level interventions (before the opening of the Humboldt Forum) to distributed discursive practices: blogs, podcasts, and critical tours now guide visitors through counter-narratives. Today, the Dekoloniale Stadtführung (Decolonial City Tours) leads groups around the Forum, beginning at the Sanchi Stupa gate at the front, and continuing through spaces like Schloßplatz West and Schloßplatz Süd.

These routes resist the state-curated “visitor journey” and replace it with a decolonial choreography of memory (fig.1).

In this way, the Humboldt Forum becomes more than a museum - it becomes a memoryscape-in-motion, as activists re-script its spatial narrative through layered engagement. Rather than a static monument, it is now a site of contestation, refusal, and creative reimagining. Soja’s Thirdspace is not just a conceptual model here; it is enacted through walking tours, performative refusal, embodied satire, and situated knowledge. The Forum is no longer a singular representation of imperial nostalgia - it is a polyphonic terrain where competing futures are performed, mourned, and co-authored.

These decolonial interventions thus co-created counter-narratives not only through protest but also through shared storytelling, multilingual dialogue, and public pedagogy. Participants ranged from artists and activists to teachers, students, cultural workers, and residents with migratory backgrounds - collectively reclaiming the Forum’s imperial façade as a space of voiced resistance. Many artists themselves embodied multiple identities, blurring the lines between activist, migrant, and community member. Their presence was never solitary: they acted in concert with broader publics who, through their participation, helped shape a collective language of remembrance and critique. As one organizer noted, *“This is not just a protest. This is where we meet, remember, and imagine otherwise”*. In these gatherings, the plaza became more than a site of opposition - it emerged as a shared platform where spatial and emotional belonging was actively forged through co-presence and exchange.

Community members held posters with messages like *“The voice of my ancestors is trapped inside the building!”*, voicing a powerful sense of intergenerational memory and affective connection. These were not abstract slogans or symbolic gestures alone - they arose from lived histories of displacement, marginalization, and inherited trauma. Here, resistance became a mode of belonging: a way to claim space, assert presence, and inscribe diasporic memory into the city’s public sphere.

Bismarck Monument: Artistic Disruption and the Co-Production of Memory

The Bismarck Monument, Berlin’s largest imperial statue’s sheer scale and symbolic weight had for decades rendered it immune to public challenge. However, recent artistic interventions have reclaimed this monument not through direct protest alone, but through what Soja would recognize as deeply spatial, affective, and collaborative Thirdspace practices. Projects like ‘Monumental Shadows’ by Various & Gould, in collaboration with Colonial Neighbours of SAVVY Contemporary, transformed the mon-

ument from a static object into a processual, participatory site of critical memory (Savvy Contemporary, 2021). ‘Shadow One’ involved physically wrapping Bismarck’s figure in a paper-mâché cast, disrupting the monument’s aesthetic dominance and re-scripting its symbolism. This act was not simply about visual obstruction - it embodied artistic labor, emotional risk, and civic confrontation. Passersby reacted in varied ways - some with curiosity, others with hostility - highlighting the monument’s contested place in Berlin’s public consciousness⁵. These reactions are not incidental - they form part of the co-creative process, where memory is shaped through confrontation, dialogue, and emotional investment in public space.

The intervention extended beyond the statue’s surface: artists performed on-site, worked on scaffolding, and engaged the public in spontaneous dialogue. The space surrounding the monument, typically structured to honor and elevate Bismarck, was instead populated by working bodies, defiant materials, and emotional expressions. Here, the monument became porous - a site where historical authority collided with ephemeral disruption. As one participant noted, the work involved confronting verbal slurs, institutional pushback, and the emotional toll of engaging in public critique. These tensions exemplify Thirdspace not as harmony, but as a fraught and fertile ground where new meanings are forged through encounter and friction.

Importantly, ‘Monumental Shadows’ resisted spatial and temporal closure. Following its first iteration at Großer Stern (Schmitt, 2021), subsequent ‘shadows’ unfolded across Berlin. ‘Shadow Two’ at Nettelbeckplatz involved live performances that reactivated the space through embodied engagement. ‘Shadows Three and Four’, hosted at SAVVY Contemporary, extended the intervention into discursive space through public workshops and panel discussions. ‘Shadow Five’ circulated the project digitally and in print through media coverage and interviews (Hosadurga, 2024).

This iterative mapping created a networked Thirdspace - an evolving geography of memory that expanded beyond the monument’s physical site. Rather than a singular confrontation, the project became a distributed, relational, and dialogic reimagining of how public memory circulates in urban space. And these Shadows were not merely artist-led events but co-created platforms where participants from diasporic communities, passersby, and local residents contributed stories, gestures, and questions, shaping both the form and meaning of the intervention.

A parallel example is ‘Demythologize That History and Put It to Rest’, which brought together artists from Angola, Cameroon, Gabon, Iraq, Mozambique, and Portugal (Savvy Contemporary, 2018). At the Bismarck site,

Wathiq Gzar's visceral performance used his body as archive and medium, confronting the statue not with slogans but with presence - making the monument briefly responsive to histories it was never built to acknowledge. These acts were not only critiques; they were inhabitations of the monument - placing new narratives in its shadow, and revealing how Thirdspace opens up even within the most seemingly closed sites.

Importantly, the artistic strategies did not occur in peripheral locations (fig.2). They occupied the monument's front-facing forecourt - the same space designated for tourist admiration and national commemoration. This

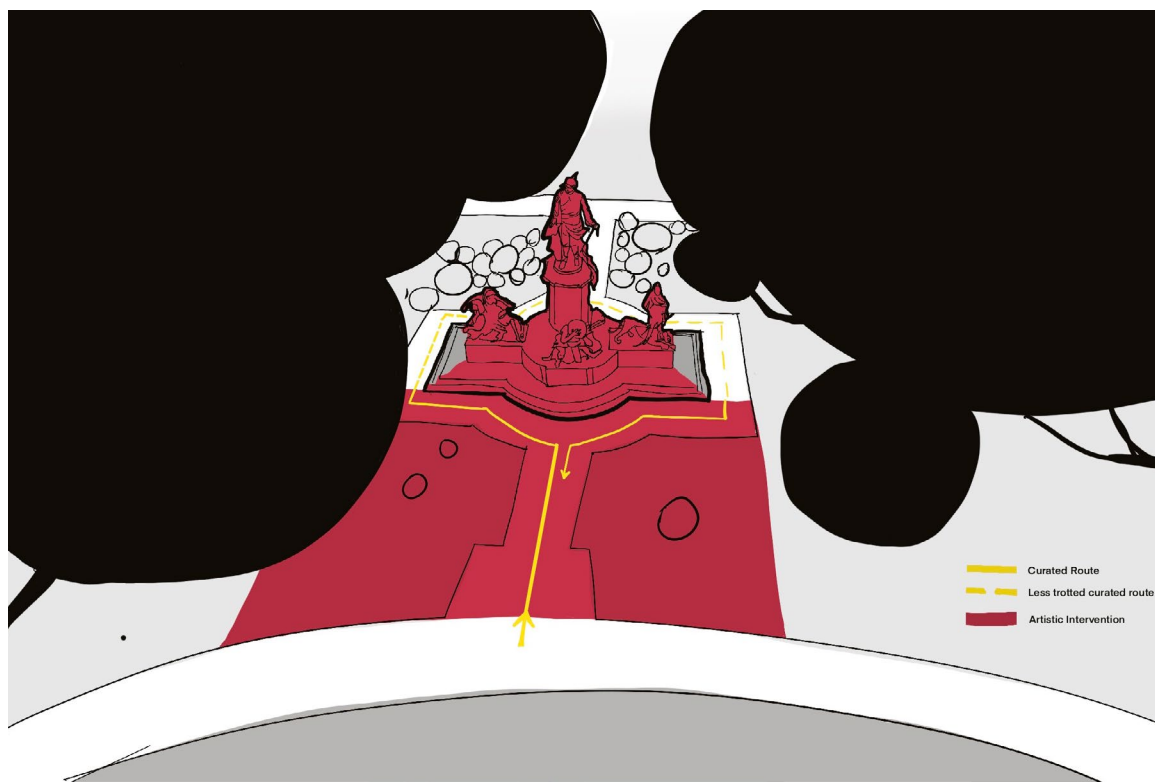


Figure 2. *Decolonial Activism Overlap Map of Bismarck Monument in Berlin*, 2025. Illustration by: Prarthana Narendra Hosadurga

spatial overlap creates what might be called critical friction: official and counter-spatial practices colliding within the same physical footprint. The monument's spatial authority is not erased, but rewritten - layered with contradictions, dialogues, and vulnerabilities.

Through these cumulative interventions, the Bismarck Monument is no longer a fixed relic of nationalist nostalgia. It becomes a living crucible of public affect, transnational critique, and collaborative memory. As Soja's Thirdspace implies, this is not about replacement, but coexistence - where permanence and protest, glorification and grief, are allowed to sit uncomfortably together.

Comparative Analysis: Divergent Forms, Shared Struggles

The Humboldt Forum and the Bismarck Monument differ in architectural form, institutional role, and visibility - and their spatial politics reflect these differences. As a state-supported cultural institution the Humboldt Forum demonstrates an internal critique of colonialism but maintains its imperial architectural design. The building's dual nature provides activists with powerful opportunities to protest against inconsistencies between its progressive statements and its historical design. The Bismarck Monument, in contrast, stands physically unchanged yet symbolically exposed due to artistic interventions. While the Forum is contested through protest and discourse, the Monument is reimagined through embodied, ephemeral acts of art and performance.

Therefore, both sites operate as Thirdspaces, but they do so through distinct spatial grammars: the Forum as a dialogic battlefield of public dissent, counter-memory, and institutional critique; the Monument as a porous platform for transnational collaboration and artistic re-inscription. What unites them is the way they are inhabited - not just physically, but symbolically and emotionally - by communities seeking justice, remembrance, and spatial transformation. Together, they demonstrate how urban colonial remnants can be radically repurposed, not by removal alone, but by occupying their meanings and rewriting their futures through co-creative, lived resistance.

Both the Humboldt Forum and the Bismarck Monument reveal the transformative potential of Thirdspace to challenge, re-script, and pluralize spatial meaning. While their original forms - one as a reconstructed Prussian palace, the other as a towering nationalist statue - serve as physical embodiments of imperial authority, they have been reinhabited and reinterpreted in different rhythms and registers by marginalized voices through performative and artistic intervention. The Humboldt Forum has become a memoryscape-in-motion, where multilingual protests and critical tours expose the limits of institutional narratives. The Bismarck Monument, while less continuously engaged, has been reconfigured at key moments through artistic labor, embodied performance, and spatial co-presence into a collaborative archive of critique. In both cases, Thirdspace is not a metaphor but a lived methodology - enacted through satire, scaffolding, song, and storytelling. These spaces thus cease to be passive containers of colonial memory and instead become active stages of public imagination, where competing histories coexist and where the future of urban memory is being continuously renegotiated.

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Conclusion: Co-Creation as Decolonial Praxis in Contested Urban Memoryscapes

The Humboldt Forum and the Bismarck Monument exemplify how co-creation, when mobilized by activists, artists, and scholars, can disrupt dominant narratives and challenge the spatial legacies of empire. Both sites are embedded in Berlin's colonial history, yet they have been transformed into arenas of critical engagement where historical memory is not passively received but actively renegotiated. While differing in their institutional status and spatial configuration, both have become dynamic sites of resistance and reimagination - Thirdspaces where collaborative interventions unsettle inherited truths and offer space for plural, evolving narratives.

This transformation is not incidental. It is the result of sustained, participatory efforts that collectively re-script urban space. At the Humboldt Forum, grassroots campaigns like No Humboldt 21!, public performances, and alternative tours such as the Dekoloniale Stadtführungen resist the Forum's attempt to aestheticize empire under the guise of intercultural dialogue. Despite its institutional framing as a site of global engagement, the Forum reproduces Eurocentric curatorial practices that marginalize non-Western epistemologies. In response, artists and activists reclaim its forecourt, façades, and exhibition narratives through symbolic refusals, poetic subversions, and dialogic tours - reframing historical narratives and opening the Forum to new perspectives that reflect the experiences of marginalized communities. Projects like 'Schlossaneignung'⁶ show that co-creation is not merely additive; it fundamentally reorients who gets to author public memory and how that memory is spatially expressed.

Meanwhile, the Bismarck Monument - though lacking formal curatorial engagement - has been similarly transformed through artistic occupation. Projects such as 'Monumental Shadows' and 'Demythologize That History and Put It to Rest' have activated this static symbol of imperial nationalism as a collaborative stage for critique, performance, and reinterpretation. Interventions like wrapping the statue in papier-mâché, staging bodily performances, or developing parallel exhibitions operate as tactile and affective counter-narratives. These are not simply acts of protest but forms of public pedagogy - transforming the monument from a relic of imperial power into a Thirdspace of collaborative re-signification, rooted in shared labor and artistic imagination.

Though these forms of decolonial activism - protests, performances, scholarship, and spatial practices - differ in form and scale, they are not isolated. They interact in complementary, relational ways, generating layered geographies of resistance. Artistic interventions shape sensory and sym-

bolic worlds; grassroots actions maintain political urgency; academic critique informs strategic frameworks. Together, they constitute a co-created ecosystem of decolonial engagement that destabilizes the fixity of imperial memory and opens space for more equitable and plural historical narratives.

Co-creation is not simply about protest or artistic reconfiguration - it encompasses participatory practices that challenge top-down narratives of history. These include ephemeral acts, like performances or the creation of counter-monuments, as well as everyday spatial practices such as gathering, resting, or performing in historically exclusionary spaces. These acts of resistance regardless of their formality, function as strong means to rewrite public memory while cultivating spaces of inclusion for populations who have lived or inherited experiences of colonization.

In this sense, Co-creation supports collective mourning and resistance as well as solidarity among diasporic and immigrant communities whose colonization experiences have been ignored in historical accounts. These areas where resistance takes place become places of belonging because they create a shared purpose and feeling of home within the urban settings. These participatory interventions promote democratic public history by actively celebrating and reclaiming marginalized groups' stories instead of erasing them.

Co-creation serves as both a central theme and an approach to regain control over space, voice and narrative authority. It recasts public monuments and institutions as contested terrains, where power is not only critiqued but redistributed through collaborative meaning-making. In the context of Berlin's colonial memoryscape, co-creation operates as a form of spatial justice: an invitation for those historically excluded to become co-authors of collective memory.

Ultimately, the Humboldt Forum and the Bismarck Monument are no longer inert symbols of empire - they are living arenas of co-produced resistance, mourning, and imagination. Through participatory transformation, they shift from Firstspaces of authority and Secondspaces of symbolic control into Thirdspaces where memory is unsettled, multiplicity embraced, and futures collectively envisioned.

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End Notes

- 1 According to Quijano and Mignolo decoloniality functions as an epistemological effort to break down colonial power structures and restore marginalized ways of thinking and living that Western dominance has suppressed. Decoloniality extends past political decolonization to confront and dismantle the knowledge and power systems that uphold colonial legacies. According to Mignolo decoloniality requires "undoing and redoing" which demands separation from Western knowledge systems along with the formation of new epistemic frameworks. This framework sets out to build spaces that recognize multiple knowledge systems and encourage intercultural respect and teamwork while addressing Eurocentric biases within modern institutions and thinking.
- 2 While some public discourse and scholarship continues to describe sites like the Humboldt Forum and the Bismarck Monument as only indirectly or ambiguously tied to colonialism, such framings risk overlooking their deep symbolic and historical enmeshment with imperial ideology, racial hierarchies, and epistemic violence. The emotional and generational tolls of these spaces - particularly for those descended from formerly colonized communities - underscore their significance within decolonial struggle. This article takes seriously the ways in which communities experience these monuments not as neutral or peripheral, but as persistent agents of colonial memory and trauma.
- 3 "Bismarck Monument" is interchangeably called "Bismarck Memorial". However, in this article I have intentionally favored "Bismarck Monument," as "memorial" implies a commemorative function that could lend undue legitimacy to the site. Given its contested nature, "monument" more accurately reflects its role as a focal point of critique and decolonial activism.
- 4 Mbembe views colonial architecture as a materialization of necropolitics, reinforcing exclusion and domination, while Rodney sees it as a means of sustaining economic and ideological control over formerly colonized societies.
- 5 The analysis draws on interviews conducted with artists and curator Various & Gould of Monumental Shadows and Lynhan Balatbat Helbock of SAVVY Contemporary involved in the intervention.
- 6 In 2024 the Schlossaneignung Initiative composed of artists and academics presented a petition to the Bundestag to demand better recognition of suppressed histories at the Forum (Rieger, 2024).