



Reconstructing Nineteenth-Century Frankfurt: Time Travel in TimeRide and the *Neue Altstadt*

Amrita Biswas and Johanna Laub

This article studies the politics of Frankfurt's reconstruction, focusing on TimeRide, a company that offers virtual reality historical tours, and its relation to the city's *Neue Altstadt* (New Old Town). By anchoring our study of TimeRide into the controversial urbanist reconstruction of the *Neue Altstadt* of Frankfurt, we adopt a site-specific and relational approach in our analysis of imaginaries of time travel. Both TimeRide and the New Old Town propose to travel into the past — back to a highly curated version of Frankfurt in the nineteenth century. Analysing how the production of cultural heritage in both the virtual and urban reconstruction project is intertwined with consumerism and travel, we address the state-corporate nexus in conceptualizing an exclusionary form of national identity. Delineating how the objects of study resonate with visual spectacles and cultural practices of the nineteenth century, especially in their promotion of mobility and immersion, we analyse contemporary investments into the (re)creation of Frankfurt's history and foreground its epistemological and affective politics. We argue that these state-corporate investments into representing Frankfurt's heritage aim to foster local and national sentiments of pride by activating a historical past which enables the reaffirmation of a selective identity of the present.



I think each of us has had the dream of travelling through time and that is exactly the vision of TimeRide: if it doesn't work in reality, we all know then that we can at least create the perfect illusion of it in virtual space.¹

The point is that the consumption of the past is a truly profound and complicated thing.²

The juxtaposition of the opening sentences of TimeRide's promotional video for its virtual history tour of Frankfurt with Jerome de Groot's argument on how we make meaning of the past offers an intersection between historical reconstruction, the politics of heritage, and consumerist culture — the focal concern of our article. To pursue this inquiry, we bring two objects of analysis into relation: TimeRide's virtual history tour and Frankfurt's reconstruction of the *Neue Altstadt* (New Old Town), both of which present a specific narrative about nineteenth-century Frankfurt. Our site-specific and relational approach, in tracing the alignment between virtual and urban reconstruction, reveals how a state-corporate nexus influences local politics of historiography. After an introduction to TimeRide's historical reconstruction, we discuss how it resonates with certain imaginaries of travel produced by popular visual entertainments of the nineteenth century. Through specific design and narrative strategies, entertainment practices of virtual immersion into history aspire to impact people's understanding of the past and its relation to the present. We subsequently anchor TimeRide's virtuality in its local geography by positioning it vis-à-vis the urban reconstruction project of the New Old Town, to analyse their constituent politics of cultural heritage and national identity.

The sensory-historical tour: promoting an authentic encounter with the past

The aforementioned video offers a glimpse into the work that TimeRide undertook to create the virtual reality simulation of everyday life in nineteenth-century Frankfurt. Founded in 2016 and operating stores in five German cities, it promises its visitors an affective and immersive journey into the past of its represented city. Comprising different forms of sensory engagement and multimedia stations, the VR segment of the attraction presents the high point of these tours.

The sensory-historical tour is designed across three stations that promise to take the visitors back to Frankfurt in the year 1891. In the first station, visitors encounter a

¹ TimeRide, 'TimeRide Frankfurt Making of', YouTube, 12 November 2020 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PzAHjn-I2uGM>> [accessed 31 July 2025].

² Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*, 2nd edn (Routledge, 2016), p. xvi, doi:[10.4324/9781315640754](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315640754).

colonial goods' store where different artefacts are put on display, ranging from soaps and spices to fabric and dried fish (*Fig. 1*). The entrance to the store, within the building that houses TimeRide, has been remodelled to align with the nineteenth-century facade of the exterior. Evading any allusions to the consequences of the colonialist expansion that lay at the core of such stores in nineteenth-century Frankfurt, the tour instead invites us to smell the 'spices from India' and the 'coffee from Brazil'. A performer, accompanied by a voiceover, displays the variety of materials at the store and explains the context in which they were consumed. Walking towards the visitors with the objects, the performer beseeches them to smell the spices and the coffee beans. The first station inevitably conjures a synaesthesia of perceptions with its display of objects — visitors not only see the dried tobacco for gentlemen and the liquorice for children, but also feel the texture of the fabrics and the smell of the herbs. Ensuring the synchronous activation of multiple sensory perceptions of the visitors, the performer underscores the 'original' collection of the goods store. As the website aptly declares:



Fig. 1: The colonial goods' store at TimeRide Frankfurt. Press image © TimeRide.

Experience the flourishing trading city on our journey through time in Frankfurt. You can look, feel, sniff and discover the Main metropolis of that time with all your senses. Fragrant spices and exotic goods take you into a world long gone.³

This celebratory positioning of the original products is in alignment with how TimeRide presents itself: an authentic and engaging retelling of the great historical past of Frankfurt, a trope that we address later. Moving on with the tour, the second station enlivens history in a bourgeois study and reading parlour of the tour's protagonist, Theodor Riedel, a merchant based in Frankfurt whose family tree adorns the walls of the station (*Fig. 2*). Symbolizing the eventful history of Frankfurt, the protagonist renders visible the strong connections that the city had with mercantile exploits, thereby anchoring the city within its history of trading and commerce. Delineating the ideals that moved this fictional family, the stations' narrative can be aligned with a social class that had developed mainly in the early nineteenth century:



Fig. 2: The study parlour at TimeRide Frankfurt. Press image © TimeRide.

³ TimeRide, 'TimeRide Senseum Frankfurt', official website <<https://timeride.de/en/frankfurt-location/timeride-senseum-frankfurt-1891/>> [accessed 31 July 2025].

the so-called *Bürgertum*, a middle-class milieu that was closely tied to the idea of civil self-determination, education as class distinction, and financial independence, often through their involvement in finance or trade. The establishment of a *Bürgertum* as a reaction against feudal structures remains central to the emergence of a German national and democratic identity in the run-up to the March Revolution of 1848–49, which constituted the first German National Assembly in the Paulskirche — standing literally across the street from TimeRide.⁴

These two stations serve as a prelude to the final station of the tour: a VR-enabled carriage ride through Frankfurt's old town (Fig. 3). Gliding along Paulskirche and Römerberg, the carriage veers through central sites of the metropolis, such as Gallusanlage, Kaiserstrasse and the central station, to finally arrive at the 'grand finale' of the tour — the International Electrotechnical Exhibition. The official website leverages the immersive potentialities of the carriage ride, noting

the highlight of your journey back in time to 1891: On a virtual carriage ride with Theodor Riedel, you will experience the extraordinary charm that the Main metropolis radiated before its destruction in World War II. With your VR glasses, you can enjoy a 360° panoramic view of the unique combination of medieval half-timbered houses and sublime Wilhelminian-style buildings.



Fig. 3: Virtual carriage ride through Frankfurt. Press image © TimeRide.

Besides the affective dimensions of the ride, an important aspect of it is the historical reconstruction, as TimeRide's founder Jonas Rothe highlighted.⁵ Crucial

⁴ It should be noted that the sociological category of *Bürgertum* is far more complex and heterogeneous than can be done justice to here. For a discussion of the specific development of *Bürgertum* in Frankfurt, see Ralf Roth, *Stadt und Bürgertum in Frankfurt am Main: Ein besonderer Weg von der ständischen zur modernen Bürgergesellschaft 1760–1914* (Oldenbourg, 1996).

⁵ Jonas Rothe, interview with the authors over Zoom, 10 August 2022.

to TimeRide's self-conception was the employment of a team of historians who engaged in meticulous research into the urban layout of the city and the facades of its houses. Mining paintings, maps, and photographs from the nineteenth century that described the city in detail, TimeRide's research team collaborated with 3D artists who virtually recreated the city's buildings of 1891. The objective was to create an exact visual verisimilitude. With 490 buildings, 5 bridges, 34 ships, 62 moving carriages, and 2377 people, the VR graphics were designed with an attention to minute details. The team not only recreated the important streets, buildings, and trading centres of Frankfurt but also the flora and fauna that could have been found in the city during the nineteenth century. The lack of archival sources in specific cases led them to extract a pattern from archival materials to make the designs. Such 'experimental archaeology', Rothe argues, is a productive method of 'authentic' reconstruction and not merely 'historical nonsense'.

TimeRide's video ends on the declaration that if the visitors had fun learning history, then the 'senseum' had achieved its goals. The word *senseum*, also employed to describe TimeRide on the official website, presents the notion of a sensory-oriented museum. While TimeRide has no proper collection, it overlaps with the space of the museum in its aspiration to generate and mediate historical knowledge. Rothe describes the experience as a senseum since the knowledge is both generated and consumed through the evocation of sensory perceptions during the historical tour. This idea of feeling history, an affective register of engaging with the past, is predicated upon a strong evocation of the 'authentic'.⁶

Circling back to the first station of the tour that displayed original artefacts, and analysing these in conjunction with visual tropes of verisimilitude in the virtual reconstruction, TimeRide's understanding of authenticity as a form of physical or material accuracy is made explicit. However, the notion of authenticity is not circumscribed to the visual domain. According to Rothe, the integration of Frankfurt's dialect as well as the German accent in the English voiceover is a careful auditory construction to induce a sense of authentic experience. The soundtrack is also an important component to the VR's sensory-scape, rising to a suspenseful crescendo towards the end to signify the culmination point of the historical tour. Rothe's decision

⁶ Christina Cameron's historical account of the debates around the notion of authenticity with reference to heritage sites is crucial to locate TimeRide's articulation of authenticity within a broader canvas. It renders a fluidity and tangibility to the notion of authenticity and historicizes the concept instead of presenting it as an ontological property of certain materials or objects. See Christina Cameron, 'From Warsaw to Mostar: The World Heritage Committee and Authenticity', *APT Bulletin: The Journal of Preservation Technology*, 39.2-3 (2008), pp. 19-24 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25433947>> [accessed 31 July 2025].

to have a live orchestra record the 3D-ambient sound of the VR tour plays into the desire for an authentic soundscape that is not electronically produced but is played by ‘real’ instruments. The initial triggers mobilized by the senseum evoke a synaesthesia of perceptions, synchronically creating stimuli that appeal to the realm of the visual, the oral, and the tactile. These are intertwined with an insistence on visual and auditory verisimilitude as well as the originality of materials. TimeRide thus attempts to deepen its multisensorial immersion into the past through an activation of the authentic as a proposed category of reception for the viewers — without taking into consideration the subjective and layered dimensions that any historical experience might entail.

Virtual travel: a topos of nineteenth-century popular entertainment

TimeRide’s promise of virtual travel resonates with popular media entertainments of the nineteenth century, which already linked immersive visual technologies to the promotion of commercial travel and mobility. The popular use of picturesque, sublime, or ‘exotic’ scenery in panoramas, dioramas, or stereoscopic images was ‘instrumental to the development of tourism’ at the time.⁷ Often these depictions were sponsored by commercial travel providers. This connection is evidenced through a fortuitous reference hidden within TimeRide’s virtual tour: as we come to the end of the ride, the virtual carriage pulls up to the fairground of Frankfurt’s 1891 International Electrotechnical Exhibition. As we do so, we pass an unobtrusive building. Research into the 1891 exhibition shows that this structure housed a panorama, which had been part of an extensive entertainment programme for the public. Visitors could benefit from a variety of spectacles, many of them powered or illuminated by electricity, such as a waterfall or a mining site. The most popular entertainment, however, was the panorama, which depicted the entry of a North German Lloyd steamship into the harbour of New York (*Fig. 4*).⁸ North German Lloyd was one of the major shipping companies of the time. Beyond the shipment of goods, it also specialized in transatlantic passenger traffic, operating a popular route between Bremen and New York, which the panorama effectively promoted.

⁷ Leen Engelen, ‘The Kaiser-Panorama and Tourism in Belgium around 1900’, *International Journal on Stereo & Immersive Media*, 5.1 (2021), pp. 132–54 (p. 152) <<https://revistas.ulusofoa.pt/index.php/stereo/article/view/7755>> [accessed 31 July 2025].

⁸ *Offizieller Bericht über die Internationale Elektrotechnische Ausstellung in Frankfurt, 1891*, ed. by Vorstand der Ausstellung (steering committee of the exhibition), 2 vols (Sauerländer, 1893), I, p. 59; and ‘Eine neue Zeit...!’, *Die Internationale Elektrotechnische Ausstellung 1891*, ed. by Jürgen Steen (Historisches Museum, 1991), pp. 236–38.



Fig. 4: Advertisement for the North German Lloyd steamship panorama at the Electrotechnical Exhibition in Frankfurt, 1891, color lithograph by G. Hunckel, Bremen. Historisches Museum Frankfurt am Main. Reproduced in 'Eine neue Zeit...!': Die Internationale Elektrotechnische Ausstellung 1891, ed. by Jürgen Steen (Historisches Museum, 1991), p. 238.

Visitors entered a reconstructed interior of a steamship on the ground floor, where they passed the first-class cabins and eventually walked up a set of stairs onto the deck to the panorama: there, a circular painting showed the skyline and shoreline of New York as it would have appeared from the ship. The painting by Hans von Petersen was set within lavish details, such as hand-cut wood carvings and painted panels, a statue of the ship's captain, and electrical lighting. Contemporary reviews of the panorama praised the painting's impressionistic quality with its evocation of steam, fog, and spray, and emphasized the effect of liveliness that the panorama achieved. One review even describes the scenery as if it were in motion:

Over the glittering wake, we can see far out into the open sea [...]. A French passenger liner meets us and lowers the tricolour in salute, which the steersman at the stern of our ship, a sculpted figure of startling truth, returns by lowering the German flag.⁹

The sensation of virtual travel created by the panorama was a successful advertising stunt for North German Lloyd. It catered to a growing desire and capacity for mobility in the nineteenth century that was no longer restricted to the upper class and their grand tour, but that was becoming part of the identity of the growing middle class in Europe.¹⁰ Tellingly, North German Lloyd had a competitor in Frankfurt: a hot-air balloon that operated daily throughout the duration of the exhibition and carried a slogan for another shipping company, the Hamburg-Amerikanische Packetfahrt-Actien-Gesellschaft (HAPAG): 'New York in 7½ days!' (Fig. 5).¹¹ TimeRide uses a version of the poster that advertised this experience as a decoration in its own space, alongside other visual material from the 1891 exhibition. Both the steamship panorama and the hot-air balloon promise mobility, already suggested by their recourse to specific means of transportation, which is linked with a privileged, surveying position of spectatorship — a combination that TimeRide will also draw on. While these practices share striking similarities in the way imaginaries of travel are promoted and consumed through the immersive qualities of visual media and its production of spectatorship, what needs to be considered are their specific historical, social, and technological contexts. But the historical example of the Lloyd panorama and its link to commercial travel prompts

⁹ B.D., 'Künstlerisches von der internationalen elektrotechnischen Ausstellung zu Frankfurt a. M.', *Die Kunst für Alle*, 6 (1891), pp. 374–75 (p. 374). All translations from the German are by the authors.

¹⁰ Some driving factors of this complex development were the emergence of greater technological mobility in terms of transport, the rise of exoticist fantasies through imperialist and colonialist expansion, as well as the attraction of large-scale archaeological excavation sites. The nineteenth century consequently saw the establishment of the first commercial travel agencies, such as Thomas Cook, founded in 1841, and with it the emergence of tourism as a social and economic phenomenon. See John Urry and Jonas Larsen, *The Tourist Gaze* 3.0, 3rd edn (SAGE, 2011).

¹¹ 'Eine neue Zeit...!', ed. by Steen, pp. 236–38.



Fig. 5: Advertisement for the hot-air balloon attraction at the Electrotechnical Exhibition, sponsored by shipping company HAPAG, 1891, color lithograph by A. Friedländer, Hamburg. Historisches Museum Frankfurt am Main. Reproduced in 'Eine neue Zeit...!': Die Internationale Elektrotechnische Ausstellung 1891, ed. by Jürgen Steen (Historisches Museum, 1991), p. 210.

questions about what kind of experience TimeRide sells and which subject it addresses. Specifically, the analytical shift from spatial to temporal travel reveals the notion of history that TimeRide produces and markets.

TimeRide and the politics of historiography

‘The past is a foreign country’, to quote a popular phrase, and TimeRide can take you there.¹² Selecting a specific destination, however, was a challenge for the company. Undecided between several historical events, TimeRide employees conducted an informal survey among pedestrians to discover to which moment in the city’s history they desired to travel back in time. The majority preferred a vision of Frankfurt that was unmarked by the damages of World War II, while others were interested in the March Revolution of 1848–49. TimeRide eventually opted for the year 1891. As TimeRide’s self-marketing shows, it presumes that an immersion into the past will deepen an interest in and engagement with history.¹³ Travelling in time, in particular, promises to combine historical facts with excitement, wonder, and personal involvement. However, while the company prides itself on the historical accuracy of its reconstruction, it arguably draws its currency less from the knowledge that it produces than from its affective promise of bridging the distance to a far-removed place: not in space, but in time.

Such a conception of the past as a foreign place, whose distance needs to be mediated, presupposes an understanding of it as essentially Other to the present — mirroring a spatial projection of cultural Otherness as something which reaffirms Western modernity’s self-perception. As David Lowenthal outlines, such a notion of history emerges in the nineteenth century under the pressure of rapid political, social, and technological changes, in which ‘the past ceased to be familiar and omnipresent, becoming remote and lost in nostalgic mists. History was more and more seen as a relentless, often painful alienation from the past’ (p. 365). TimeRide mirrors a historicist *Einführung* into the past, an empathic attempt at reliving history and bridging the present’s disconnection from it. To Walter Benjamin, such a historicist empathy introduces a major political issue: it inevitably reproduces the victors’ perspective on history. It reinforces the perspective of those with the power to determine what is transmitted to the future:

According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures. [...] They owe their existence not only to the efforts of

¹² David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country: Revisited*, 2nd edn (Cambridge University Press, 2015). Lowenthal takes the phrase from the first sentence of L. P. Hartley’s novel *The Go-Between* (1953).

¹³ TimeRide, ‘TimeRide Senseum Frankfurt 1891’, official website.

the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.¹⁴

Closed off from the present, the empathy with the past alleviates the feeling of alienation without having to assume responsibility for the past and the ways it lives on in the present. Of course, from the perspective of a company that sells historical experiences, leaving customers behind with an uneasy feeling is not in their best interest. As Susanne Reichl points out, a common rule in time-travel stories is that ‘history must not be meddled with’. In these narratives, ‘history is seen as inviolable and immovable.’¹⁵ It points to the horizon of expectation that visitors will passively (but enthusiastically) take this historical narrative as it is handed down to them. In this sense, the politics of this affective immersion into the past and the narrative it creates about history’s relation to the present are noteworthy.

Outlining the ways in which individuals participate in the making of history both as ‘actors’ and ‘narrators’, Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that the word *history* consequently encapsulates both meanings: the reference to historical processes themselves and to the narratives created about these processes.¹⁶ Trouillot ascribes great significance to the construction of such narratives in the making of history, claiming that it is the result of a ‘differential exercise of power’ to create narratives in which certain aspects of historical processes are highlighted while others are marginalized (p. 25). His critical notion of history as a narrative construction provides a useful template to interrogate the storyline of TimeRide that can be understood as one of many other narratives ‘with no particular distinction except for its pretense of truth’ (p. 6). Our motive is to highlight how TimeRide’s narrative construction presents a specific articulation of the past that pushes for an image of Frankfurt as a source of local pride.

As mentioned in the introduction, TimeRide’s story revolves around a bourgeois merchant who runs a colonial goods’ store and is financially invested in the development of electricity, tying the beginning of the tour to the eventual visit to the International Electrotechnical Exhibition. It projects a particular story of Frankfurt that aggrandizes the city’s mercantile history, while sidelining other aspects of it, such as the building of wealth of the middle and upper classes through the German Empire’s colonialist

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, in *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, ed. by Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas MacKay Kellner (Routledge, 1990), pp. 255–63 (p. 257).

¹⁵ Susanne Reichl, ‘No Time Like the Present: Tracing 19th-Century Ideologies in 21st-Century Time Travel Adventures’, *REAL*, 37.1 (2021), pp. 89–115 (p. 108), doi:[10.24053/REAL-2021-0005](https://doi.org/10.24053/REAL-2021-0005).

¹⁶ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon Press, 1995), p. 2.

infrastructures (formalized in 1884 through the Berlin Conference) and the exploitation of labour forces and resources abroad and at home. What is selected for presentation is a certain strand of historical narrative that constructs a linear account of the city's history: globalized commerce and technological progress in the nineteenth century are presented as the foundation for Frankfurt's wealth and contemporary identity as a centre for international finance and trade. More specifically, TimeRide's narrative highlights the proto-neoliberalist tendencies within the historical *Bürgertum*, such as the importance of private capital, a liberal market, and the self-reliant individual.¹⁷ These connections between the past and the present are explicitly drawn through the design of the tour. The VR simulation ends with an aerial levitation of the visitors, referencing once again the historical hot-air balloon ride. While we are lifted towards the sky, the outlines of contemporary Frankfurt's skyline (central to the city's marketing as 'Mainhattan') arise on all sides, panoramically encircling the visitors and suggesting a teleological lineage between nineteenth-century and contemporary Frankfurt.

Frankfurt's New Old Town: grounding virtual travel in the urban site

After leaving TimeRide, or before entering it, visitors will likely pass through the so-called *Neue Altstadt* of Frankfurt, merely three hundred metres away. When they do, they will be moving through an area that is also featured in TimeRide's VR simulation. In fact, the New Old Town is an urban construction project that recreates a nineteenth-century version of Frankfurt (Fig. 6). Completed in 2018, it comprises fifteen 'creative reconstructions' of historical buildings and twenty contemporary interpretations of nineteenth-century secular architecture.¹⁸ The main idea behind the New Old Town, which replaced a brutalist administrative complex from the 1970s, was to rebuild a central part of the city to evoke its state before the destruction of World War II. The citizens' initiative behind the project argued for a (re)construction in the spirit of *Rückbesinnung* (looking back to the past for reflection and insight), to make Frankfurt's history more visible and to deepen the citizens' identification with the heritage of the city. An additional argument was the economic prospect of creating a tourist attraction.¹⁹

The project proposal argued that the New Old Town would give Frankfurt back an 'authentic' part of its history, which was contrasted with a supposedly alienating

¹⁷ See Michael Schäfer, *Geschichte des Bürgertums: Eine Einführung* (Böhlau, 2009), pp. 238–40.

¹⁸ For an overview of the project as well a discussion of its architectural and political dimensions, see *Die immer neue Altstadt: Bauen zwischen Dom und Römer seit 1900*, ed. by Philipp Sturm and Peter Cachola Schmal (Deutsches Architekturmuseum, 2018).

¹⁹ Moritz Röger, 'Die Altstadt als (historische) Konstruktion oder die Konstruktion von Geschichte in der Debatte um die neue Frankfurter Altstadt', in *WerteWandel: Prozesse, Strategien und Konflikte in der gebauten Umwelt*, ed. by Julia Ess and others (Birkhäuser, 2021), pp. 97–108 (p. 102).



Fig. 6: The *Neue Altstadt* (New Old Town) of Frankfurt am Main, March 2024. © the authors.

modernist architecture. Yet as Moritz Röger has pointed out, the very idea of an *Altstadt* is an invention of the nineteenth-century *Bürgertum* in Frankfurt, who undertook large urban interventions on this terrain to convert what had been an overcrowded living quarter of the working class into a beautified architectural ensemble (pp. 103–05). The ‘reconstruction’ of this area thus presents, as Röger writes, ‘the polished image of a history that never really existed’ (p. 106). While the initiative in favour of the New Old Town gained large traction across different political parties, the project arguably caters to a conservative, even regressive idea of replacing historical ruptures with a highly embellished, nostalgic version of the past. It is hardly surprising that the first proposition for this project came from right-wing populist members in the city parliament.²⁰ In fact, the New Old Town is just one example of a larger trend in Germany’s urban development, which has seen a number of reconstruction projects that efface moments of historical disruption and trauma: for example, the Dresdner Frauenkirche (destroyed in World War II, rebuilt 1994–2005) or the Berliner Schloss

²⁰ Stephan Trüby, *Rechte Räume: Politische Essays und Gespräche* (De Gruyter, 2020), pp. 137–50.

(2013–20), which replaced the East German Palace of the Republic, for which, in turn, the GDR had torn down the original palace in the 1970s.

As predicted, the Frankfurt New Old Town has become an important tourist attraction for the city. People can stroll through the area and stop by one of the highly curated, vaguely nostalgic selection of shops on the ground floor: a wine bar, a coffee house, a hat maker, and a jewellery store, to name a few. On the upper floors behind the ‘historical’ facades lie modern, high-end apartments, to a large extent subsidized by a city that is notorious for its lack of affordable living space. As Frankfurt’s marketing department praises it: ‘Here, old craftsmanship and historically authentic architecture meet modern infrastructure and comfort.’²¹ The New Old Town is thus a win-win for the state and the private sector. The city refinances the costs for its heritage project through the sale of real estate and commercial spaces, while their owners profit from the attractive location of their property. Nebojša Čamprag has further discussed this particular entwinement of heritage politics with tourism, city development, and private capital in the case of Frankfurt’s New Old Town.²²

While the politics of the project have often been pointed out, we would like to draw attention to the role that technology, specifically virtual reality, plays here, and how it links back to practices of virtual travel in an uncanny way. The movement in favour of the New Old Town gained momentum once a virtual 3D model of the construction project had been designed.²³ The city marketing also relied on a VR model for their marketing campaign, and it still offers an augmented reality app today (with a meagre 2-star rating on Apple’s App Store). A **promotional video**, which was published in 2017, draws on such a virtual model and presents VR as *the* technology to envision the prospect of the New Old Town. The video follows a few visitors who are invited to marvel at a 3D model of the construction project. They are handed VR goggles and a pair of stereoscopic glasses, into which a smartphone is inserted. An interface on a tablet shows us the parameters of the simulation, suggesting high-tech quality: ‘Details, Depth, Surface, Ambience, Physics’ are all cranked up to the maximum, while the VR gear is booting. We are now fully plunged into virtual space (*Fig. 7*). Under sweeping music, a remarkably homogeneous crowd of people (considering the cultural and ethnic

²¹ Tourismus+Congress GmbH Frankfurt am Main, ‘Frankfurt am Main hat die neuste Altstadt der Welt’, press release, 3 June 2019 <<https://web.archive.org/web/20200924053728/https://www.frankfurt-tourismus.de/Presse/Pressemeldungen/Frankfurt-am-Main-hat-die-neuste-Altstadt-der-Welt-Von-der-Bausuende-zum-preisgekroenten-Vorzeigeprojekt>> [accessed 12 August 2025].

²² Nebojša Čamprag, ‘Museumification of Historical Centres: The Case of Frankfurt Altstadt Reconstruction’, in *Tourism in the City: Towards an Integrative Agenda on Urban Tourism*, ed. by Nicola Bellini and Cecilia Pasquinelli (Springer, 2017), pp. 165–78, doi:[10.1007/978-3-319-26877-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-26877-4).

²³ Röger, p. 102.

diversity of citizens in Frankfurt) marvel at the wonders of the New Old Town. They stand on the balcony of their new home or peek into shops; for example, a bookstore dedicated to *Dichter & Denker*, referring to a trope of Germany as the land of poets and thinkers, forged in the early nineteenth century. Select shots highlight details such as historical sculptures and architectural ornaments, attesting to the accuracy of the historical reconstructions. The templates of virtual travel are clearly discernible here: imagination of mobility, evocation of authenticity, and activation of affect, supported by visual media. The virtual 3D model of the New Old Town does more than visualize an idea, we argue. Its promise of virtual travel does not take us back in time, but sells a trip to the future, yet to a future that looks back to the past for reassurance.



Fig. 7: Promotional video for the *Neue Altstadt*, produced by HHVISION, YouTube, 14 March 2017. Screenshot by the authors.

Multiple national and commercial interests intersect here to define what constitutes heritage, a trope that is integral to the politics and ethics of remembering. Vinzenz Hediger, Didi Cheeka, and Sonia Campanini argue that the concept of cultural heritage relates to particular ‘modern and western conceptions of history, citizenship and nationhood as well as to the history of European conquest and colonialism’.²⁴ Such an understanding of cultural heritage helps scrutinize the valorization of local pride as a central tool for building collective identities that pertain to the domain of the national

²⁴ Vinzenz Hediger, Didi Cheeka, and Sonia Campanini, ‘Reconfiguring the Audiovisual Heritage: Lessons from Nigeria’, *The Moving Image*, 21.1–2 (2021), pp. 55–76 (p. 56), doi:[10.5749/movingimage.21.1-2.0055](https://doi.org/10.5749/movingimage.21.1-2.0055).

as well. The authors further note that the ‘concept of cultural heritage [...] designates a process of selection through which material and intangible objects are attributed to a specific group or society as their meaningful legacy’ (pp. 56–57). Undeniably, the production of heritage is a selective process that engenders what should be celebratorily remembered by posterity and what should be elided over. In particular, both TimeRide and the New Old Town offer a version of heritage that caters to the stabilization of the *Bürgertum*, a sociological category that has arguably been in pronounced crisis since the late twentieth century.²⁵ In their reproduction of a certain perspective on Frankfurt’s history, and the proposal to immerse oneself in this vision through imaginaries of virtual travel, TimeRide and the New Old Town both attempt to establish a coherence of history and identity that does not reflect the multiplicity of milieux that have made up and continue to make up Frankfurt’s civic society. At the same time, both render visible the shift from statist conceptions of heritage towards the conglomeration of state-private investments into defining heritage today.

TimeRide and its proposition of virtual travel inevitably has to be understood in relation to this urban context and a politics of a past summoned to return. In fact, the company was able to draw on existing research and reconstructions that were undertaken for the New Old Town, as they collaborated with architects and designers who had been involved in the construction project. But the connection extends beyond personnel intersections, as TimeRide plays into the official heritage politics of Frankfurt, as embodied by the New Old Town, all too well. Both sell an affective experience of history that is trying to foster a positive identification with the city and stimulate local patriotism, while catering to the tourism industry. At the same time, local patriotism is anchored within the domain of national identity, manifested by the burgeoning pattern of urban reconstructions across Germany. Yet a noteworthy difference remains: while TimeRide refers to a specific place in time — Frankfurt in 1891 — the New Old Town operates through a synthesization of signifiers that evoke a compressed, but evasive notion of the nineteenth century. Yet both activate this history as a source of local and national pride: a past through which to reaffirm a selective identity of the present.

²⁵ Schäfer, pp. 242–43.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

