# Is the Destruction of Urban Structures a Form of Violence?

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*"The reality and reliability of the human world rests primarily on the fact that we are surrounded by things more permanent than the activity by which they were produced."* Hannah Arendt (1958)

*"To be sure, a cityscape is not made of flesh. Still, sheared-off buildings are almost as eloquent as body parts (Kabul, Sarajevo, East Mostar, Groznyy, 16 acres of lower Manhattan after September 11, 2001, the refugee camp in Jenin). Look, the photographs say, this is what it's like. This is what war does. War tears, war rends. War rips open, eviscerates. War scorches. War dismembers. War ruins."* Susan Sontag (2003)

Humanity's cities, its buildings and monuments, its feats of engineering and structural design, are the backbone and embodiment of its different civilizations. The notion of the city is closely linked to what it means to be 'civilized'. Furthermore, it could be argued that the whole of human existence is captured through the notion of the urban – an interpretation of Aristotle's *zoon politikon* – that our potentiality can only be achieved in the polis (Mendieta, 2010).

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And buildings in themselves are creations of humankind's desire for shelter, for beauty, for a better living and for utility. Individual buildings can be seen as not just examples of distinctive periods of history, but as symbols of pride and distinction, of national culture and of individuality: the Eiffel Tower, Big Ben and the Kremlin for instance are examples of these 'urban symbols as synecdoches' (Strauss, 1961). Architecture itself is an art, if not 'the greatest of the arts' (Meier, 2007). This is why the built environment that people live in is not simply a décor, a backdrop to their lives – it is an integral part of existence.

People shape public space and are, in return, shaped by it. The built environment is of immense importance and that is the reason why this space has been a target throughout human history – from the siege of Troy and the razing of Carthage to the total destruction of Dresden and the leveling of Rotterdam. It is not only cities in general that have been aimed at; the purposeful destruction of individual buildings, structures and monuments has its symbolic meaning for both the destroyers and victims: the Kristallnacht onslaught on synagogues, the blowing-up of churches in Stalin's USSR or the demolition of the remains of the Prussian royal residence in Berlin: the Stadtschloss. The destruction of architecture and infrastructure remains an opaque aspect of political violence and is often regarded as secondary to programs for the killing and displacing of individuals or is seen as the careless behavior of soldiers. Consequently, the widespread phenomenon is not treated as a class of political violence in its own right (Coward, 2009).

This essay argues the contrary – that the destruction of urban structures and entire cityscapes is not merely collateral damage to military actions or an indirect victim of terrorist attacks. Instead, the purposeful targeting of the built environment is a distinct form of violence and can be just as traumatizing and important as that against human beings. Firstly, the questions of space and urbanity are presented. Following from that, the meaning of urban structures and cityscapes is explored from a collective, cultural, and symbolic point of view. Leading on, the issue of violence is looked into with a deep consideration of the concept of 'urbicide,' which is tightly associated with that of genocide. The considered issues will be analyzed in relation to the famous examples of Mostar during the wars in ex-Yugoslavia and the World Trade Center in New York with a conclusion explaining why the destruction of urban structures should be considered a distinct form of violence in itself.

**Shaping Space, Identity and the Urban**

People are social creatures who interact and operate in an environment that they themselves create and shape. The space that humankind occupies is both personal and public at the same time; one lives one's life in a certain space which is 'one's own', so to say, and at the same time is part of the wider context which constitutes the 'shared'. Hewitt (1983) explains that public place cannot be fully understood as only a set of spatial relations, biophysical habitat, and impersonal socioeconomic functions. He goes on to note that the place's 'material attributes are indeed essential ingredients and vital clues to a 'larger meaning'. He remarks that those ingredients are *shaped* into places by the personal works, exchanges, and intelligent participation of the resident communities (Hewitt, 1983). This idea is further elaborated by Bachelard (1964), Relph (1976), Tuan (1977) and Seamon (1979), who in their different approaches present human occupancy as the creating and upholding of places through coordinated actions, continuous communication, shared experience, symbolic values and identities. Hence, the space that people occupy is literally constructed, and thereby endowed, with an existence and history that define the human characteristics of the world (Hewitt, 1983). This is very close to Shield's (1991) notion of 'social spatialisation,' which means 'to designate the ongoing social construction of the spatial at the level of the social imaginary (collective mythologies, presuppositions) as well as interventions in the landscape (for example the built environment)'.

In addition, Hetherington (1997) argues that modernity produces greater attentiveness to spatial specificity, both through the moralization of space and the embedding of past and future hopes in particular locations. This leads to the understanding that the built environment around us is full of meaning that is particular to and modeled by each person as an individual and also by the collective. This aspect of the collective is essential. What is experienced collectively offers the possibility of *duration* as a community; in other words, a future and a past (Coward, 2009). Savage, Warde and Ward (2003) explain in their discussion of Benjamin's work that for him 'the city is a repository of people's memories and past, and is also the receptacle of cultural traditions and values'. Bevan (2006) notes that buildings gather their meaning through their everyday function, their presence in the townscape and their form. He

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goes on to explain that '[t]hey have meaning attached to them as structures, or… simply as containers of meaning and history' (Bevan, 2006). This inferred meaning is crucial to the understanding of identity.

All this shows that the built environment is not only a scenery, a stage for human life. Everything that constitutes public space has a meaning, be it historic, cultural or metaphorical; in fact, it could be argued that it has just as much meaning and importance as human life in itself. Furthermore, as it was noted, cities are an integral part of the understanding of identity. For Berman (1996) it is through the substrate of the city that identity can take root. By the destruction of the city, this is lost and identity cannot find its ground. It is additionally argued that the built environment captures events and helps to shape identity, providing a type of bridge between cultural narratives, whatever their character: religious, linguistic or mythic, in the realm of the 'aesthetic turn' (Moore, 2008). Ricoeur (1995) explains that 'the identity of a group, culture, people, or nation is not that of immutable substance, nor that of a fixed structure, but rather, of a recounted story'. It can be argued that architecture, monuments in particular, is the keeper of this recounted story and thus a keeper of identity. That is the reason why an attack on architecture could be considered an attack on the population that identifies with it. Hence, aggression against urban structures (shelling, destruction, desecration of religious sites) is, by proxy, aggression against the people, i.e. violence. But what exactly does the urban consist of and is it only extended to the metropolises of the world?

Cities, creators of identity, characterized by their buildings and citizens give rise to the notion of being 'urban'. In his exemplar essay 'Urbanism as a Way of Life', Louis Wirth (1996) discusses that it is the size, density and heterogeneity of the populations of cities that constitute 'those elements of urbanism which mark it as a distinctive mode of life'. The concept of *heterogeneity* is vital in this case, and Coward (2009) takes it as the existential quality that defines the urban. For him, heterogeneity is the defining property of the urban. It should be noted, however, that 'the urban' should not only be limited to the city (as opposed to 'the rural' of villages and estates) (Coward, 2006). This is because the countryside is constituted of a multiplicity of identities as well. Although it lacks the city's dense built environment, it creates its own unique kind. That is, the 'urban' refers both to the specific building patterns that identify the city (or village) as well as to the particular experience of living in such an environment (Coward, 2009). Consequently, the 'urban' is the mixture of the whole experience of living in a heterogeneous environment of identities supplemented by an equally diverse built environment.

## The Destruction of Architecture and 'Urbicide'

The destruction of architecture can be looked upon as merely achieving a military objective, getting closer to victory, or can be viewed as being second and a background to the casualties caused by a terrorist strike. When buildings are not in the path of the military but *are* the target, their architecture takes on a totemic quality (Bevan, 2006). Additionally, '[t]o destroy a building is… to destroy that which comprises the condition of possibility of a community in the context of which individuated modes of existence are possible' (Coward, 2009). Coward (2009) goes on to point out that there are three principle interpretations of the destruction of the built environment, each understanding it through different notions: military, through accepted norms of military action; symbolic, as an element of cultural heritage; and metaphoric, which provides for political analysis.

From a political point of view, buildings become targets not because they are political but because they are politicized; why and how, and by whom they were built, regarded or destroyed (Bevan, 2006). That is why the ruin of a particular building or structure can become in itself a very clear political statement, because the environment reflects a specific form of politics (Moore, 2008): for instance, the tearing down of the Berlin Wall and the leveling of the Presidential Palace in Groznyy. Such individual accounts of destruction, together with the reading of the larger context of urban space and its devastation, give way to examining the 'imaginative geographies through which political violence works' (Gregory & Pred, 2007). This is complementary to the opinion that contemporary warfare and terror now largely boil down to contests over the space, symbols, meanings, and support systems of urban areas or structures (Graham, 2004). In regards to this concentration on the destruction of cities in modern war, Ken Hewitt (1983) has come up with the term of 'place annihilation'. After all, now wars are no longer subject to the Clausewitz definition of the battlefield, and one never knows where terror would strike. The built environment, the city, has become the new theatre of operation. Thus, urban structures become victims. And this total war against urban structures starts to resemble genocide; namely, the total razing down to the ground of every single structure is

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reminiscent of the complete erasure of an ethnicity. As it is noted: '[t]he concept of genocide entails an understanding of destruction in relation to that which is destroyed' (Coward, 2009).

The structures that people create are part of their cultural heritage, as was earlier noted. Hence, genocide against them can be labeled cultural genocide – 'because it represents what must be destroyed in order to achieve the aim of erasure, and thus purity of, ethnic identity on a particular territory' (Coward, 2009). This is what Riedlmayer (1995) refers to as a process of 'killing memory'. Orentlicher (1999) observes that cultural genocide was left out of the 1948 Genocide Convention, adding weight to the position that the extensive destruction of buildings should be interpreted as a distinct form of violence. In addition, both Sells (1996) and Shaw (2007) maintain that the destruction of buildings should rightly be seen as a constituent part of a program of genocide because to destroy the shared culture is the de facto destruction of the national group. Without this culture, the sense of belonging is lost. Therefore the destruction should be approached as integral to, rather than dissimilar from, genocide. The sheer immensity of the idea is overwhelming. Bevan (2006) notes that the belief that the destruction of the physical fabric – as different from human lives – has the powerful capacity to demoralize. And just like the loss of life can have an impact on morale, so does the destruction of buildings.

'Urbicide' is a term similar to that of genocide and shares the same logic behind it (Coward, 2009). However, the interpretation that is becoming more widespread amongst academics is concerned with the annihilation of the built environment, a 'complex mutual interpellation of violent politics and metropolitan existence' (Campbell, Graham and Monk, 2007). Taken very literally, 'urbicide' refers to the killing, slaughter or slaying from the Latin 'caedere,' of the subsumed, under the term urban, from the Latin 'urbs' for city. As previously discussed, it was shown that the main quality of 'urban' is *heterogeneity*. Thus, '[u]rbicide, then, is the destruction of buildings not for what they individually represent (military target, cultural heritage, conceptual metaphor) but as that which the condition of possibility of heterogeneous existence' (Coward, 2009). Hence, urbicide does not only refer to the act of the material destruction itself but also stands against the very way of life that the material represents, against its identity and culture. That is why it is a form of political violence in its own right, integral to specific political programs that want to destroy the political possibilities that inhere to the public space generated by buildings (Coward, 2009).

## Mostar and the Twin Towers: An Elegy for Architecture

The terror of urbicide has most been explored in relation to the atrocities of the wars in ex-Yugoslavia, especially in the context of Mostar. Another prime example of building destruction comparable to urbicide is the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11th 2001. These two illustrations show the different types of assault: the 'classic' military one and the terrorist one. At the same time, their goals are arguably the same: the symbolic destruction of the material as an attack on the ideological and cultural.

It could be argued that Mostar, and the Stari Most in particular, the bridge that connected the west and the east banks of the old town on the Neretva River, had symbolized the history and achievements of Bosnian society and its hybridity, which had bound together heterogeneous cultural communities (Coward, 2009). Built by an Ottoman architect in the 15th century, the bridge metaphorically and literally linked the Oriental East, to the European West. The name of the city was derived from the bridge – Mostar means bridge keeper (Bevan, 2006). It could be said that the structure of any bridge is readily too symbolic (Bevan, 2006). It was a place where plural cultures were interwoven (Sells, 1996). As Bevan (2006) notes: 'The attack on the bridge was an attack on the very concept of multi-ethnicity and the co-joined communities it had come to embody'. It is important to mention that the bridge did not qualify as any significant military target, it held 'little to no strategic value' (Coward, 2009). By the time that it was destroyed following heavy and continuous shelling, it was the last bridge standing on the Neretva River. The very act of the destruction itself appeared to echo with 'savagery' (Coward, 2009). When writing about the destroyed bridge, the Croatian writer Slavenka Drakulic asks the question "Why do I feel more pain looking at the image of the destroyed bridge than the image of [a dead] woman?" and then goes on to answer that: "*A dead woman is one of us – but the bridge is all of us*" (as cited in Coward, 2006).

It was not just the bridge that was a target of the Bosnian-Croat Army. All types of structures and public space were targeted – 'mosques, churches [and] synagogues', 'markets, museums, libraries, cafes.' The places where people

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gathered to live out their collective life were the main focus of attacks (Adams, 1993). It is as if with the annihilation of the heterogeneous environment that characterized this multi-identity city, ethnic cleansing would be achieved in full. History would be rewritten without a trace of the peaceful cohabitation of the different ethnicities. That is why the urban structures of Mostar became targets in themselves as symbols of a multiethnic way of life.

The Twin Towers of the World Trade Center are a very interesting case. Just like Stari Most, the Trade Center was designed for a particular social function (Moore, 2008). It is important to note that the term 'urbicide' was first introduced in relation to the towers' construction in the 1960s by urbanists who opposed their building (Campbell, Graham, and Monk, 2007). Unlike now, however, the term then had a meaning referring to the explosion in scale of construction. The symbol of the skyscraper itself is very striking, 'from [the time of] the Tower of Babel… [it] suggests man's over-reaching hubris' (Bevan, 2006). And in this case it symbolized the American way of life, the desire to get ahead, the American Dream. It was also a symbol of the power of the present world economic order of capitalism and was in close proximity to, arguably, the center of world commerce – Wall Street. Hence, the attack on the Twin Towers was also an attack on the American life, on the growing and outstretching power of globalization, neo-liberal economics and capitalism, and the Western identity (Safier, 2001). Their ruin was a challenge to the biggest power on Earth, but it also strikingly proved the fragility of that global power (Baudrillard, 2002). As Baudrillard (2002) notes: 'the towers, tired of being a symbol, which was too heavy a burden to wear, collapsed, this time physically, in their totality'.

People live their lives in an environment of their own making, composed of buildings and structures that represent their identity, collective memory and culture. This environment of public space, in turn shapes the people who have created it. That is why an attack on it, it could be said, is an attack on the people. Whether it is only individual structures that are destroyed or whether it is a question of urbicide, where the whole environment and the plurality that symbolizes it is ruined, neither are as important as what the action itself indicates. This is a particular form of violence, which is just as dehumanizing as that against human beings. It must be considered carefully, so that violence itself can be reexamined. As Bevan (2006) notes: 'a dead building, like a dead language, can be sadly eloquent'.

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