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(IN)VISIBLE TRACES: THE PRESENCE OF THE RECENT PAST IN THE URBAN LANDSCAPE OF SARAJEVO

The author reflects on her observations during the summer school 'History Takes Place – Dynamics of Urban Change.' She discusses number of locations, which embodied or recalled the memories of war and siege of the city, both those that remained from 1992-95 and those newly created. Based on the concept of the production of space, article outlines the specifics of interventions into urban landscape with either monuments or alternative forms of commemoration.
Key words: *memory, monument, Sarajevo, siege, urban space.*

But we do not decide what to forget and what to remember.
Ozren Kebo, *Sarajevo for Beginners*

Sarajevo is a pure life.
Kateryna Kalytko,
Introduction to *Sarajevo for Beginners*

Sarajevo: Briefly about the Context

The gunshots near the Latin Bridge on 28 June 1914 started the Great War, and the shots on the Vrbanja Bridge on 5 April 1992 inaugurated the list of victims of the Siege of Sarajevo. The 'short' twentieth century started and finished on different bridges in the same city. Hence, war created one of the frames through which the history of Sarajevo might be perceived. Military conflicts over the last hundred years transformed both the social and material, as well as the symbolic, structures of the city and left a number of traces in its urban landscape. Fran Tonkiss states that there are cities overwhelmed with history, and Sarajevo is among them. The past is extremely visible here, especially in spatial morphology and spatial details.[1]

At the beginning of 1992, after a referendum for independence, Sarajevo became the capital city of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). A month later it was besieged by the Yugoslav People's Army and the Army of Republika Srpska for the longest period in modern history – a total of 1,425 days. As of 27 May 1994, between 300,000 and 380,000

[1] Tonkiss, F. (2014). Sarajevo Stories. In *Reconstructing Sarajevo Report*, ed. B. Kotzen and S. Garcia, London, P. 12.

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Figure 1. Latin Bridge (photo: Natalia Otrishchenko, 2017)

residents lived in the city.[2] They were cut off from all basic necessities such as water, food, electricity, heating, and medicine, and existed under the constant threat of either snipers or artillery bombardments. Ivana Maček describes the everyday life under the siege as an 'imitation of normal life'[3] and 'struggling for subsistence.'[4] According to the Final report of the United Nations Commission of Experts, nearly 10,000 people had been killed or were missing (including over 1,500 children), and 56,000 inhabitants had been wounded during the period from 5 April 1992 to 28 February 1994. A number of cultural sites were either completely destroyed, like the Olympic Museum, or partially ruined. The Bosnian National and University Library was intentionally shelled and subsequently burned. Also, it was estimated that shelling has destroyed over 10,000 apartments (and damaged over 100,000). As for the other buildings in the city, twenty-three per cent were reported as seriously damaged, sixty-four per cent as partially damaged, and ten per cent as slightly damaged.[5] Many buildings still have scars from the explosions of shells and bullet holes. After the Dayton Peace Agreement, which ended the war, the entire country was divided by the 'Inter-Entity Boundary Line.' Sarajevo became both the capital of BiH and the capital of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, while the eastern part of Sarajevo belongs to the Republika Srpska[7]. Miruna Troncotă argues that the memorialization of war is the crucial lens for the perception of contemporary Sarajevo.[6] Consequently, the remembrance of the siege is vibrant and manifests itself in various ways.

The Urban Space of Sarajevo: Memories and Meanings

According to Martina Löw, 'spaces do not simply exist, but rather they are created in action (that as a rule is repetitive).'[8] Therefore, urban landscape is both a medium and an outcome of social relations, and imaginary, it is constituted, and supported by different actors and practices. It exists in people's minds and memories and is manifested and shaped through everyday lives and recurrent rituals, so the meaning

[2] More statistical information is available in Bassiouni, C. M. (1994). Final report of the United Nations Commission of Experts established pursuant to security council resolution 780 (1992). Annex VI – part 1. Study of the battle and siege of Sarajevo.

[3] Maček, I. (2009). *Sarajevo under Siege. Anthropology in Wartime*, Philadelphia, P. 5.

[4] Ibidem, P. 62.

[5] Bassiouni, C. M. (1994). Final report of the United Nations Commission of Experts.

[6] Troncotă, M. (2015). Sarajevo – A Border City Caught between Its Multicultural Past, the Bosnian War and a European Future, *Eurolimes* 19, Pp. 119–138.

[7] The territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) consisted of three entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), with mostly Bosniaks and Croats, the Republika Srpska (RS), with mostly Serbs, and the city of Brčko (Brčko district), a self-governing administrative unit.

[8] Löw, M. (2016). *The Sociology of Space. Materiality, Social Structures, and Action*, New York, P. 145.



Figure 2. Old Jewish cemetery: the shelling of the city was held from here (photo: Natalia Otrishchenko, 2017)



Figure 3. Layers of urban landscape and damaged facade (photo: Natalia Otrishchenko, 2017)

and function of different spaces is never entirely fixed. The production of space connects human actors, the material environment, and symbolic structures into one network. This process might be interrupted, violated, or completely changed for a number of reasons, either human (like war) or natural (such as an earthquake). Based on these theoretical assumptions, I argue that the process of re-shaping urban landscape in general and in Sarajevo particularly is connected both to the re-shaping of memory culture and to the activities of various actors (politicians, local municipality, foreign investors, urban planners, architects, etc.). In this case I am interested in the manifestations of the recent past in various forms and on different scales, especially in the context of multiple divisions and conflicting memories.

This text is largely based on preliminary observations and field notes conducted during the Summer School 'History Takes Place –

Dynamics of Urban Change'.[9] I will focus on a number of locations, which embodied or recalled the memories of war, both those that remained from 1992-95 and those newly created. This short analysis is limited to the Stari Grad and Centar municipalities of Sarajevo, located in the Federation of Bosnia and Hercegovina. I do not discuss the case of Eastern Sarajevo, as I do not have enough evidence from this area. At this point I also have to make a personal confession: this was my first time in Sarajevo. The city was present in my mental map mainly because of information from television programs during the 1990s and history lessons on the Great War. Somehow my imaginary Sarajevo was deprived of the surrounding landscape and its social and architectural diversity, and was fixed in exact time. My knowledge about the city was very limited and, after the week that I spent there, I realized how many things are still left to discover.

The urban environment of Sarajevo and its transformation was intensively studied. Gruia Bădescu researches the process of 'coming to terms with this past' (a term borrowed from Theodor Adorno) in the field of urban reconstruction through overcoming the physical destruction, problematizing the nature of conflict with the help of design, and approaching the city in its new sociodemographic diversity.[10] Jordi Martín-Díaz looks at the post-war restructuring policies and their impact on the urban spatial structure and peace-building through the period of transition from socialism to capitalism.[11] Anthropologists Stef Jansen[12] and Ivana Maček[13] are investigating various aspects of everyday life and the embodiments of routines into the spatial structure of the city either during or after the war. Bronwyn Kotzen and Sofia Garcia are interested in different ways to memorialize the past and how they are used in the contemporary governance practices of BiH.[14] They agree with the arguments of Cornelia Sorabji[15] that this process is often driven by political interests rather than by memory itself. The traumatic experiences of war and conflict could be easily instrumentalized, as they are deeply emotional and connected to strong existential feelings. Memory is moved from the personal to a public level and becomes a tool for political statements.



Figure 4. Kovači cemetery. Soldiers of the BiH Army and the first president of the BiH, Alija Izetbegović, are buried here (photo: Natalia Otrishchenko, 2017)

[9] The Summer School 'History Takes Place – Dynamics of Urban Change' took place in Belgrade in Sarajevo from 4 to 15 September 2017. It was organized by ZEIT-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius and the Gerda Henkel Foundation. More information about this educational initiative is available on the project's webpage. Retrieved from: https://www.zeit-stiftung.de/en/projects/researchandscholarship/humanitiesandsocialsciences/historytakesplace/

[10] Bădescu, G. (2014). City Makers, Urban Reconstruction and Coming to Terms with the Past in Sarajevo. [in:] *Reconstructing Sarajevo Report*, ed. B. Kotzen and S. Garcia, London, P. 15.

[11] Martín-Díaz, J. (2014). Urban Restructuring in Post-War Contexts: the Sarajevo Case, *Hungarian Geographical Bulletin* 63:3, Pp. 303–317.

[12] Jansen, S. (2013). People and Things in the Ethnography of Borders: Materialising the Division of Sarajevo, *Social Anthropology* 21:1, Pp. 23–37.

[13] Maček, I. (2009). *Sarajevo under Siege…*

[14] Kotzen, B. and Garcia, S. (2014). Politics of Memory and Division in Post-Conflict Sarajevo. In *Reconstructing Sarajevo Report*, ed. B. Kotzen and S. Garcia, London, P. 23.

[15] Sorabji, C. (2006). Managing Memories in Post-War Sarajevo: Individuals, Bad Memories, and New Wars, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 12:1, Pp. 1–18.

Nonetheless, memory requires a place to manifest itself. It emerges only when there is a certain type of connection between the location and either personal experiences of people or adopted knowledge. We might call it, after Marianne Hirsch, 'memory' and 'postmemory.'[16] Therefore, different mnemonic groups (such as witnesses, second and third generations, foreigners with a vast range of familiarity with the place etc.) will differ in their experiences of urban landscape and the levels of affiliation with conflicts embodied into it. During my stay in Sarajevo, I was constantly comparing it with Lviv, where urban violence took place in my space, but not in my time, while Sarajevo's siege was in my time, but not in my space. There are various distances in relation to temporalities or spatialities that we construct to comprehend post-conflict traumas, but sometimes these distances became blurred, and the past becomes extremely visible in the present. To describe the dissonance between neutral (and often beautiful) landscapes and the hidden terrible crimes behind them, Martin Pollack uses the term 'poisoned landscapes.'[17] This concept highlights the agency behind the act of poisoning – those are actually people, who destroyed the landscape. The potential of this concept can be extended from the natural to the urban environment. I was extremely surprised to see a cosy, leisurely, and welcoming city in the valley between green mountains and to know that it survived the siege. Crimes that occurred there were visible and mediatized, and consequently they have poisoned the urban landscape or even made Sarajevo a 'wounded city,'[18]or 'ranjeni grad.'[19] Referring to the ideas of Martina Löw, space in general, and urban space particularly is constantly produced by various actors, and individual memories or public representations help to construct and fix its symbolic meaning. The presence of the recent past in the landscape of Sarajevo is strengthened by various interventions into the space, either in the form of physical monuments or commemorational activities.

[16] Hirsch, M. (2012). *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, New York.

[17] Поллак, М. (2015). *Отруєні пейзажі*, Чернівці.

[18] Till, K. E. (2012). Wounded Cities: Memory Work and a Place-Based Ethics of Care, *Political Geography* 31:1, Pp. 3–14.

[19] Prstojević, M. (1994). *Sarajevo, ranjeni grad*, Ljubljana.

Field Notes from the Site: The Memoryscape of Central Sarajevo

When you walk along Marsala Tita street from Ferhadija towards the Parliament, on the right you will approach the beautiful Veliki Park, a calm green area close to the city centre. Across the street, in front of the newly constructed 'BBI Centar', you will see a fountain with two glass sculptures and seven cylinders with 521 inscribed names and years of life – a memorial to the children who were killed during the siege of the city. Also, if you carefully look at the surface of the fountain, you will notice the imprints of children's feet. This monument was constructed by Mensud Kečo, and its form indicates purity and the fragility of life, as the cylinders at rotation resemble the sound of children's toys. There is some mismatch in the name of this monument in Bosnian and English. In the first case it is written 'to killed children of besieged Sarajevo 1992-1995 (ubijenoj djeci opkoljenog Sarajeva 1992-1995),' while it is translated into English as 'to children killed during the siege of Sarajevo 1992-1995.' The English version is more inclusive, as it recalls the entire event and does not exclude parts of Sarajevo which were not surrounded, like Grbavica. It is the only memorial to the siege



Figure 5. Memorial for Children Killed during the Siege located in Veliki Park (photo: Natalia Otrishchenko, 2017)

and to a certain social group. In a certain manner, it indicates that memory is still fresh and it is difficult to materialize it into the form of a monument. Jordi Martín-Díaz, based on fieldwork in 2010 and 2013, identified 109 new urban projects developed in the post-war period (single family dwellings were not considered). According to the map created as a result of his survey, there were nine memorials (a bit more than eight per cent) among them, and the majority of new developments are either office buildings or commercial projects.[20] The visual language of commemoration has not been established yet, rather it is deeply embodied into urban landscape, as we will see a bit later.

There is another sculpture by the same artist, Mensud Kečo, in Veliki Park. It is the well-recognized figure of Ramo who calls his son Nermin to surrender. Both were killed in 1995, and were found in a mass grave near Srebrenica in 2008. The moment of the call was recorded on video, and it is included in the exposition of the museum in Srebrenica. The monument 'Nermine, dodi' provides links to the events beyond Sarajevo, but which occurred during the same war. The monument is not related to the place itself. However, it belongs to the same memoryscape and therefore resonates with the memorial nearby, as it is also a tragedy of father and son. Through the dialogue of these sculptures, a space for remembering and an emotional feeling of the horror of war is created. Somehow, they are in contrast to the green zone of the park, and at the same time, build opportunities for deep personal experiences of mourning and grief. Old tombstones nearby add to the feeling of calm of the entire area and make it more like a place for silent reflection.

[20] Martín-Díaz, J. (2014). Urban restructuring in post-war contexts…, Pp. 311–312.



Figure 6. 'Nermine, dodi', Statue for Ramo who calls his son Nermin to surrender located in Veliki Park (photo: Natalia Otrishchenko, 2017)

The presence of the siege in the urban landscape of Sarajevo is also manifested via memorial tablets on the houses with the names and numbers of the victims. Such plaques frequently highlight the ethnicity of those who committed the crime, while the victims are reported as 'citizens of Sarajevo' with no regard to their origin. This is one of the examples of disparate memory policies in a multi-ethnic country, which still has a lot to do for reconciliation.

One of the most remarkable commemorations of the siege could be seen throughout the city. It is a bottom-up initiative, which was subsequently appropriated by the local administration: the craters from explosions of shells that resulted in several deaths, which are filled with a red coloured substance. Some of them are bright and visible, while others have almost faded away. Spencer Burke recalls them in his essay:[21]

> If you direct your gaze downward while walking Sarajevo's streets, you will sooner or later spot a bright red rupture blooming in the pavement. These are gashes caused by exploding shells during the siege. Rather than smooth them out and repair the damage of war, the city filled them with red resin. They are meant to commemorate the dead and transform the scars from the city's darkest chapter into things of beauty. There are hundreds of these scattered around Sarajevo, and each is unique. Looked at with a sanguine eye, it resembles a flower. And so it is called a Sarajevo Rose.

Unlike the memorials in Veliki Park, the rose marks an exact location. I was constantly avoiding stepping on them as if I would disturb or disrepute the memory of those who died at this place. Cornelia Sorabji states that 'studies in the domain of "politics of memory" often say a lot about politics but not so much about memory; a monument is

[21] Burke, S. (2011). Sarajevo Rose. Retrieved from: http://theharvardadvocate.com/article/68/sarajevo-rose/



Figure 7. Sarajevo Rose near Parliament of BiH (photo: Natalia Otrishchenko, 2017)

not a memory.'[22] However, these extremely condensed interventions embodied a specific and tragic moment. Sarajevo roses are very organic in a city with many scars, and therefore they do not violate the urban fabric. Instead, they are almost invisible but powerful statements about the role of location. Even if the road surface is updated (for example, at Ferhadija Street near City Market), a place of explosion often remains unchanged. These roses contribute to the development of a unique spatial commemoration culture, when all urban landscape is perceived as an arena where history took place. They are constant reminders for those who want to remember, even when they do not give you any information about the tragedy that happened here – no names, no dates, just a location. They are the best example of a visual language, which is universal for everyone.

Finally, the history of the recent war could be read through the facades bearing the traces of shots and explosions. The city was heavily damaged, but, as Gruia Bădescu quotes architect Igor Grozdanić, a cofounder of Studio non stop, 'physical destruction is actually minor. Mental destruction is a bigger problem and a more important one.'[23] The issues of restoration and reconstruction are still important here: what to restore and reconstruct? The answer might be both material and social structures, urban environment and community. On the surface there are mosques, churches, and synagogues built in close proximity in Sarajevo's city centre, but how close are people? The development of trust and a multi-ethnic and religious tolerance for 'common life' could be the primary goals for the policies of reconciliation. A difficult task for a society with so many conflicting memories, but this does not mean that it is impossible.

[22] Sorabji, C. (2006). Managing memories in post-war Sarajevo…, P. 2.

[23] Bădescu, G. (2014). City Makers, Urban Reconstruction…, P. 16.

Instead of a Conclusion

Cities are either silent or saturated with the memory of the war. Sarajevo is somewhere in-between: the recent past is extremely visible there, but it is also unobtrusive. Various memorials of the war are tidily incorporated into the urban fabric. However, most questions emerge from those discourses that accompany such interventions: how are they described, what words are used, whom are they accusing, who is called a victim? All these monuments and memorable tablets are a small part of a large structure, which according to Cornelia Sorabji has a lot to do with policy and less to do with memory.

Therefore, a Sarajevo rose, a powerful nonverbal symbol, could be the most prominent example of local memory culture. It appeals to your perceptions, and to your emotions, without the mediation of language. It gives you a very distinct experience of 'exactly-here', while being located in spatial and temporal coordinates. As humans, we do not decide what to forget and what to remember, but with our engagement with the space we shape the urban environment and create a certain frame for remembrance. With our practices (participating in rituals, laying flowers, taking pictures, interacting with monuments or purposively ignoring them, etc.) we either strengthen, level down, or invent certain ways of remembering. Simple observation is not enough to make general conclusions about the memory culture in Sarajevo, but they point to the existence of several trends. First of all, there is an organic inclusion of monuments and memorials into the city's landscape, and secondly, there is a search for a visual language and reference systems that would be both universal and appeal to the unique (but also very tragic) experience of the city.

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