

BOOK REVIEWS

Cultural genocide? It begins with the destruction of architecture¹

Bevan, Robert. 2023. *Shkatërrimi i kujtesës: Arkitektura në luftë*. Cuneus: Prishtinë, translated into Albanian by Florina Jerliu [Original Title: *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War*, 2nd expanded edition, London: Reaktion Books, 2016]

Wars have been an inseparable and unstoppable part of the development of mankind. Bloody conflicts have occurred on many fronts and in various forms. One of the most widespread and horrific forms has been, and remains, the destruction of buildings, houses, cities, and various cultural, historical, and religious monuments. Robert Bevan, author of *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War*, argues that the burning, demolition, bombing, or other forms of destruction of architecture are not merely consequences of war. Rather, they are the essential purpose of those who instigate wars. By destroying and attempting to eradicate archaeological artefacts, historical monuments, and cultural heritage in general, their aim, in essence, is to undo the memory, identity, and very existence of the people who created and built these structures. The spectrum of architectural objects examined in the book is wide and diverse, ranging from religious structures like mosques, churches, synagogues, and various temples to civil ones such as museums, libraries, schools, and special buildings. Moreover, the range of cases analysed is extensive, both in terms of spatial and geographic scope as well as in temporal and historical context. Through numerous analyses, Bevan illustrates the connection between the destruction of buildings and the intention of subjugation, as well as the latent intent of the aggressors to destroy the tangible structures of memory and identity of the affected society. The value, meaning, and symbolism of these objects often become apparent only after their destruction and the traumatic confrontation with their loss.

Even to this day, I still remember the story my late deceased mother told me. She watched in horror from the balcony of our apartment in the northern part of Mitrovica as the neighbourhood in front of our building, inhabited by Albanians, was burned by Serbian paramilitary forces. Some houses also sheltered pigeons, which, fortunately, escaped by flying. These pigeons returned for several days in a row to the ruins of those burned houses, where everything had been reduced to ashes. The same fate befell

the old mosque of the city, the bridge over the Ibër River, and many other cultural and historical monuments. In this context, as Bevan convincingly argues, the destruction of artefacts and objects is not “collateral damage”, but systematic destruction aimed at creating a state of cultural cleansing and, ultimately, enforced oblivion. Stones and bricks, as part of a people’s material heritage, become the enemies of those who attempt to exterminate that people. Bevan notes that “if the touchstones of identity are no longer there to be touched, memories fragment and dislocate – their hostile destruction is an amnesia forced upon the group as a group and on its individual constituent members. Out of sight can become, literally, out of mind ...” (pg. 29).

How people remember the past not only reflects their understanding of the present but also influences how they construct their future. Architecture and cultural heritage serve as integral parts of collective memory, thus helping to preserve the identity of a social group. As such, they become coveted targets in blatant attempts to destroy certain people. The author cites examples from the destruction of Akhenaten in ancient Egypt, to Carthage, whose language, culture, and religion did not survive the destruction by the Romans. The discussion also includes the ancient cities of the rich Aztec, Mayan, and Inca civilizations, extending up to the 20th century with cities such as Guernica, Dresden, Nablus, Aleppo, Sarajevo, Mostar, and numerous settlements in Kosovo. The author details the case of the destruction of the Mostar Bridge, built in the 16th century and under the protection of UNESCO, which collapsed on November 9, 1993, after successive bombings by Croatian forces, despite having no military significance or posing any threat to safety. The bridge, symbolizing coexistence between communities, multiculturalism, inter-religious tolerance, and being part of a historical legacy, was precisely targeted for attack and destruction for these reasons.

At the beginning of this century, the first attempts at legal regulation and codification of cultural property protection according to international law were made when the Hague Convention of 1907 was approved, which was later supplemented by the 1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in Armed Conflicts. Despite these measures, the systematic destruction of historical heritage and cultural cleansing was not prevented by the existing international legislation. The author illustrates this point with the deliberate and systematic destruction by Serbian forces in Bosnia, where 3,226 objects of historical heritage were destroyed, including 1,415 of Islamic heritage, 309 Catholic, and 36 Orthodox. In Sarajevo alone, 1,386 monuments of cultural heritage and historical buildings were destroyed. The brutal, merciless, and systematic dismantling of non-Serb architecture in Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo was undeniably an integral part of the Serbian nationalist policy’s goal of ethnic cleansing and genocide. Similarly, the destruction of synagogues during Kristallnacht by the Nazis, the Tibetan cultural heritage by China, and the Armenian cultural and religious heritage by Turkey were terrifying warnings of genocide and systematic cultural cleansing.

At the same time, the author presents many examples where destruction becomes a tool and goal of terrorist groups, as was the case with the most prominent and symbolic collapse of the Twin Towers in New York. This includes the massive bombing of cities during the Second World War, where over 200,000 tons of bombs were dropped on

German cities alone. Similarly, the bombings against Dubrovnik and many other places were attempts to instil fear, panic, and despair in the population as strategic goals of terrorism. Additionally, the issue of heritage destruction becomes part of political propaganda, as reflected in the book with the case of the report on the website of the Ministry of Culture of Serbia, which accuses NATO forces and Kosovo Albanians of destroying Serbian churches and religious buildings. However, as the author points out, the research report by Harvard researchers Andrew Herscher and András Riedlmayer convincingly refutes these claims as baseless and manipulative in many cases. Prominent examples include the destruction of the historical monument of the League of Prizren and the Catholic Church of Saint Anthony in Gjakova, which, according to Serbian claims, were attacked by NATO bombs, when in fact they were destroyed by Serbian police with grenades launchers in March 1999.

With an excellent knowledge of historical context and political circumstances, along with exhaustive arguments, Bevan draws a connection between the destruction of houses, cultural and architectural heritage, on the one hand, and people, on the other. He elaborates on this connection even in cases of invasions, revolutions, ethnic, and sectarian divisions, as seen in Palestine, Tibet, Cyprus, Beirut, Belfast, and other locations. Bevan also explains the process of reconstruction and commemoration as part of the misuse and fraud involving the recreated evidence of buildings and artefacts that become a continuation of politics by other means and serve to create a new reality on the ground, as well as to reinforce existing powers. The restructuring of cities as part of political revolutions is also examined in this book, which aims to revise history, for example, the case of Moscow under Stalin's rule, Beijing during Mao's, and Bucharest during Ceausescu's regime. As he emphasizes, "buildings are not political but are politicized by why and how they are built, regarded and destroyed" (p. 23).

His criticism extends to the negligence and carelessness of states and the international community regarding threats to, and destruction of, millennia-old cultural heritage and archaeological sites, as seen in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and elsewhere. Consequently, he insistently calls for the full implementation of international law conventions for the protection of material and cultural property, as well as for harsher measures and judgments against those who destroy such heritage and those who command them, treating them as war criminals for these crimes. The trials of the Bosnian Serb leaders, Ratko Mladić and Radovan Karadžić, with charges of destroying holy places, and of the Croatian general Slobodan Praljak for the destruction of the Mostar Bridge, or the Serbian military for the bombardment of Dubrovnik, are encouraging in this regard. In these very disturbing times, with televised images of devastation in Gaza, Ukraine, or elsewhere, it should be acknowledged that "the destruction is often the result of political imperatives rather than simply military necessity" (p. 262).

The central argument that Bevan constructs throughout the book is that architecture serves as a constant reminder of the social memory, culture, and past of a community, which is why it becomes a target for attacks, demolitions, and numerous modifications during conflicts, wars, and revolutions, and its destruction causes profound trauma. This demonstrates an inextricable link between the destruction of material culture and

the subjugation of its creators. Therefore, the book rightfully demands our attention and awareness. It is also read as a plea that such destructive phenomena should not pass without our opposition and insistence on condemnation and, where possible, prevention.

The book is written with detailed information and abundant data on the described cases and the general context of the conflicting parties. Written in a rich and accessible language, it is an almost essential resource for all interested researchers in the field, in architecture as well as in history and the social sciences at large. With stylistic finesse and scientific objectivity, the book successfully elucidates the connection and interaction between architecture, memory, and identity, presenting evidence and numerous examples from different times, places, and circumstances, of the dangers threatening cultural heritage and the consequences of its destruction.

In conclusion, congratulations are due to the translator and publisher for their work in bringing this valuable and necessary book to an Albanian-speaking audience, promoting awareness for the protection of cultural heritage and for the restoration of those assets destroyed during and after the war, which, in Kosovo, there are not a few.

1 This book review is translated from Albanian into English by Arsim Canolli

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