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H

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LECTURE

EDITED BY SOFIA CELLI (POLITECNICO DI MILANO), ELENA FIORETTO (POLITECNICO DI MILANO) AND ELENA POZZI (MINISTERO DELLA CULTURA)

REVIEWS BY THE EDITORIAL STAFF

ARCHITECTURE AND CONFLICT *EDITORIAL*

Edited by Sofia Celli (Politecnico di Milano), Davide Del Curto (Politecnico di Milano), Elena Fioretto (Politecnico di Milano) and Elena Pozzi (Ministero della Cultura)

With more than fifty active armed conflicts worldwide and an increasingly widespread presence of social, environmental, and geopolitical tensions, the relationship between architecture and conflict now emerges as a field of inquiry that is both urgent and complex. Conflict can no longer be understood solely as an exceptional event or as a destructive interruption of history, but rather as a structural condition that cuts across territories, cities, and their heritage, leaving traces that settle over time, both materially and symbolically.

As recalled in the Call for Papers for this issue of ADH Journal, architecture is called not only to confront the most visible outcomes of violence, destruction, loss, and trauma, but also to engage with less evident and more everyday forms of conflict, including inequalities, exclusions, and cultural and environmental fractures. The Call itself was informed by the themes explored during the twelfth edition of the Mantovarchitettura festival, which provided an initial framework for reflection and discussion. Within this context, architecture and architectural research take on the role of critical practices, capable of reading the present, conveying its complexity, and, in some cases, opening up new possibilities for coexistence and memory. Several of the editorial contributions and invited essays included in this issue are directly connected to the festival, extending its debates into the pages of the journal.

The *Essay by Images* opens the issue by entrusting the visual dimension with the task of conveying the density of conflict as a historical and collective experience. The contribution devoted to Chilean architecture and the work of Cristian Undurraga creates a layered narrative in which identity, landscape, and political memory are inextricably intertwined. The images do not simply illustrate conflict; rather, they place it in tension with the very idea of design, showing how architecture can become a space of confrontation and, at times, of reconciliation, without ever neutralising the trauma from which it originates. Conflict thus emerges as the matrix of a design practice that is conscious of its ethical and civic role.

This perspective is complemented by the *Essay from the Archive*, dedicated to Andrea Bruno's work in Afghanistan and conceived as a moment of tribute and reflection following the architect's recent passing. Drawings and photographs function not only as tools of knowledge but also as testimonies to a long-term commitment in contexts marked by war, political instability, and the destruction of heritage. The archive is not presented as a neutral repository, but as a space traversed by tensions, where cultural responsibilities, collective rights, and the very possibility of the survival of monuments are at stake. In this sense, the essay frames conflict as an intrinsic dimension of conservation practice, transforming it into an ethical and political act capable of holding together loss, design, and future, while reaffirming Bruno's intellectual legacy within the contemporary debate.

The *Lecture* introduces a further level of reflection, offering an explicitly theoretical reading of the relationship between architecture, memory, and conflict. The idea that architecture is grounded not in soil but in memory opens up a perspective in which design becomes a critical tool, capable of making fractures and absences visible without claiming to resolve them. In this view, conflict is not something to be pacified, but a condition to be consciously traversed, so that the built environment may continue to question the present and engage with the fragility of democratic systems.

It is within this theoretical and critical framework that the papers selected through the call for papers are situated. Together, they articulate the theme Architecture and Conflict across different geographical contexts, scales, and disciplinary approaches, showing how conflict can take heterogeneous forms that are often not immediately recognisable. Heather Clydesdale's contribution reflects on the role of public libraries in Taiwan as civic infrastructures capable of strengthening democratic resilience in a context shaped by geopolitical pressures and forms of non-conventional conflict. Through the case of the Beitou Library and its subsequent developments, architecture is read as a space of social and cognitive mediation, able to foster practices of knowledge sharing and to build trust, thereby redefining the very meaning of the public building.

A different perspective is offered by Mirna Mikhail, who shifts attention from the material construction of space to its representations. By analysing cinema as a form of counter-archive in the Palestinian territories, the author shows how absence, ruin, and fragmentation become operative conditions for a critical reading of space. In these contexts, architecture continues to exist even when it is materially denied, as image, trace, and symbolic construction, capable of keeping open the relationship between memory, identity, and the possibility of imagining a future.

Santiago Araque Collazos approaches conflict as a long-term urban process, reading the transformations of the city of Cali through the relationship between material and immaterial dimensions. The essay highlights how violence, inequalities, and social tensions have shaped urban form and everyday practices of inhabitation over time, leaving persistent marks. Within this framework, architecture and heritage appear as living archives of conflict, but also as potential resources for activating processes of regeneration and social recomposition.

Closing the section of selected contributions, Qendresa Ajeti's work reflects on the role of architectural heritage in post-conflict contexts, focusing on conservation devices as tools of mediation between memory, territory, and reconstruction practices. Through the case of historic monasteries in Kosovo, the essay invites readers to consider heritage as a dynamic space, crossed by layers of meaning, in which architecture participates in the redefinition of the cultural landscape after conflict.

Alongside the papers selected through the call for papers, the invited contributions further expand the field of observation, introducing theoretical and operative perspectives on other critical contexts. In his essay, Alessio Battistella addresses post-war reconstruction in Mosul, interpreting architectural design as a practice capable of restoring continuity, identity, and room for action to local communities. Through the case of the Ekhlas School, reconstruction emerges as a cultural process as much as a technical one, grounded in constant dialogue with the context and with the people who

inhabit it.

Luka Skansi's contribution shifts the focus to the issue of conservation in the Balkans, highlighting the uncertainty of the past as a structural condition of preservation practice. Through examples of destruction, rewriting, and manipulation of twentieth-century architecture, the essay shows how conservation often stands at the centre of political and cultural tensions, compelled to confront conflicting memories and the traumatic legacies of recent conflicts.

The section concludes with Ekaterina Golovatyuk's essay, which addresses conflict on the level of contemporary representation. By interrogating the museum and the display as unstable spaces in which the present is staged and continuously renegotiated, the text offers a critical reading of exhibition practices, restoring to architecture the role of a tool capable of making visible the tensions between memory and design.

Taken together, the contributions gathered in this issue show that conflict is not external to architecture, but a condition that deeply permeates its practices, theories, and responsibilities. Without claiming to offer definitive answers, the issue instead seeks to open a space for critical reflection, reaffirming the role of architecture as a tool for questioning the present and for giving form, memory, and meaning to the fractures of our time.

BEYOND LENS AND SKETCH
ANDREA BRUNO IN AFGHANISTAN, BETWEEN DRAWING AND PHOTOGRAPHY

By Giorgio Danesi (Università Politecnica delle Marche and Università Iuav di Venezia) and Fabio Marino (Politecnico di Milano)

Throughout his long and distinguished career, during which he was deeply involved in architectural conservation, the architect Andrea Bruno (1931–2025) cultivated an unconventional dialogue with built heritage, combining careful preservation with a deliberate and functional repossession of it. He developed an approach in which transformation was essential for the survival of historical structures, rather than a threat to their integrity[1]. From the 1960s his lasting collaborations with UNESCO, took him to sites across the Mediterranean, the Middle East and Central Asia, with Afghanistan at the center. For more than five decades, Bruno carried out surveys, conservation projects and advisory missions at landmarks such as the Buddhas of Bamiyan, the Minaret of Jam and the Citadel of Herat. These interventions unfolded in contexts of political instability, conflicts and iconoclastic violence, where the protection of monuments is inseparable from broader questions of social resilience and cultural rights[2].

In 2019, the extensive documentation produced over this trajectory - including drawings, sketchbooks, photographs, technical reports - was donated by the architect to the Università Iuav di Venezia, where it is now preserved and made accessible as the *Andrea Bruno Fund* within the Archivio Progetti. Among its sections, the materials dedicated to Afghanistan, largely digitised, stand out for its breadth and coherence, tracing Bruno's long-term relationship with a country repeatedly affected by wars and geopolitical tensions. The following paragraphs highlight two complementary tools that accompanied the architect on each mission: his travel sketchbooks and cameras. From the 1960s onwards, Andrea Bruno travelled with a notebook in one hand and a camera in the other, using drawing and photography as intertwined ways of understanding and engaging with heritage in periods of conflict and instability.

TRACES OF MEMORY IN THE AFGHAN SKETCHBOOKS

Across his long life, Bruno considered drawing both as a daily practice and a fundamental instrument of his profession. From his early years at the Faculty of Architecture of the Politecnico di Torino in the 1950s to his most recent

works, he meticulously preserved an extensive collection of drawings. This corpus includes sketches, academic design exercises, views of Turin, diary pages, travel notes and much more. At its core are the small pocket sketchbooks, sorted by year and topic, that accompanied him on his travels around the world. These modest objects, sometimes worn by use, contain a vast and surprisingly coherent production: surveys, technical notes, but also images that go beyond simple documentation and search for what lies beyond the visible.

It was in Afghanistan, where Bruno first arrived in 1960, accompanying Giuseppe Tucci and the ISMEO missions[3], that this practice of filling sketchbooks found its full expression. Accustomed to drawing Turin, moving between strongly expressive accents and the precision learned in Mario Passanti's open-air lessons, he suddenly found himself immersed in a context different in scale, form and culture. Drawing thus became a means to orient oneself, to understand, to measure: the sheets dedicated to the survey of monuments reveal a rigorous line, dense with notes and comparisons, and show how the graphic gesture often anticipate the project, shaping and questioning it.

The Afghan sketchbooks unfold a series of unusual perspectives, unexpected viewpoints, and visual montages interacting across different planes. In a series of video interviews focused on his drawings[4], conducted during the preparation of a book on his drawings[5], Bruno speaks of the need to go "beyond boundaries". Photography, he explains, captures the dimensional limit of a surface, whereas drawing instead allows viewers to perceive "behind, above, below", as if it were a succession of images taken from unreachable points. Over forty years, Bruno recorded not only what he saw, but also what he feared and hoped for: the fragility of monuments, the destructions of war, and the uncertainties surrounding each intervention. Drawing becomes a repository to which he could return over time, a personal archive gathering testimonies, intuitions and reconsiderations. He never spoke of sketches, but of drawings and *di-sogni* [*sogni* means dreams in Italian], each one "unique and repeatable, always authentic".

Fully aware of the value of this heritage, Bruno devoted considerable care to its archiving. Browsing the collections he personally organised, the sequential logic of many drawings becomes evident: a subject recurs, shifts, and is explored from different angles, tracing the development of thought. This is evident in his encounter with the great Buddha of Bamiyan in the 1960s, in the views of the Minaret of Jam from the same period, and in scenes of daily life observed in a country undergoing radical transformations, from Soviet occupation to American intervention. His use of colour is equally sparing and intentional, while words - short notes and marginal thoughts - remain a constant presence, completing the image.

When Bruno returned to Afghanistan in 2002, following the destruction of the Buddhas, the sketchbooks registered a different tone, more poetic and suspended. Facing the Minaret of Jam, once again under threat, his notes intertwine with reflections on the duration and fragility of a monument that, as he wrote in a sketch, "may never end, may have no beginning". His drawings reveal the strength of a line shaped by the sensibilities of an architect and a dreamer, guided by an ethical impulse refined through a long, thoughtful wandering.

## THE ROLE OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE AFGHAN CORPUS

Within the *Andrea Bruno Fund*, the Afghan materials include a dense photographic corpus comprising several hundred images produced between

the early 1960s and the 2010s. While the notebooks record impressions, constructive details and rapid notes, the photographs capture situations in their spatial and material complexity: the encounter between monuments and landscape, the condition of decorated surfaces, the organisation of building sites, the gestures of craftsmen and the everyday life of communities marked by conflict. For this selection, the focus has been placed on photographs from the 1960s, which are of particular depth and are often dedicated to monuments that no longer exist as a result of iconoclastic destruction, such as the Bamiyan statues demolished by Taliban attacks in 2001. In those years Bruno used a *Rolleiflex* camera, later replaced by a *Hasselblad*, both producing square-format images. Once back in his studio, these materials became the basis for technical drawings and projects of restoration, consolidation or reconstruction.

A first group of shots is devoted to the relationship between architecture and territory. For example, the sequences on the Buddhas of Bamiyan and the Minaret of Jam show how Bruno constructs viewpoints that situate the monument within a wider landscape. Distant shots frame the sites within the morphology of the valley or the river; closer views progressively isolate the architectural bodies, until only the rock face or the cylindrical shaft of the minaret occupy the square frame. The passage from panoramas to details reveals an operational use of photography as a tool for reading scales, hierarchies and vulnerabilities. Equally important is the series focused on surfaces and materials. Bruno documents the textures of Afghan monuments: incised brickwork, glazed tiles, carved rock. Many photographs concentrate on zones of loss, fractures in the decorative skin, detachments between facing and structural core. These images become working documents that support the diagnosis of decay, the mapping of lacunae and, later, the design of reintegration strategies based on compatibility and distinguishability.

Another nucleus concerns construction sites and local labour. The documentation of the restoration of the Timurid mausoleum of Abdur Razzaq in Ghazni follows the stages of the work: shoring, underpinning of foundations, reconstruction of collapsed vaults and walls, cleaning of interiors, and the installation of a small archaeological museum. The images underline the role of Afghan workers, portrayed while handling bricks and mortar, checking new masonry with plumb lines, or assembling steel and glass display cases. Photography thus records not only the transformations of the monument, but also the collaborative dimension of the chantier.

Especially after the Taliban destructions, these photographs now assume the role of visual testimony, reconstructing the arc that precedes and follows the loss: images of the statues still standing, photographs taken during the demolition, views of the empty niches and the pulverised rock. Within the archive, the same images bear witness to Bruno's ethical position against literal reconstruction and in favour of reversible, contemporary devices to evoke the absent statues. Seen from today's perspective, the Afghan photographs of the Andrea Bruno Fund are no longer only operational documents, but archival objects that make it possible to retrace the intersection between architecture and conflict. They reveal how the camera accompanied, in parallel with the sketchbook, a practice of conservation based on close reading of places and systematic documentation of change. In the context of a country repeatedly devastated by war, these images help to recompose a visual memory that is at once professional and personal[6].
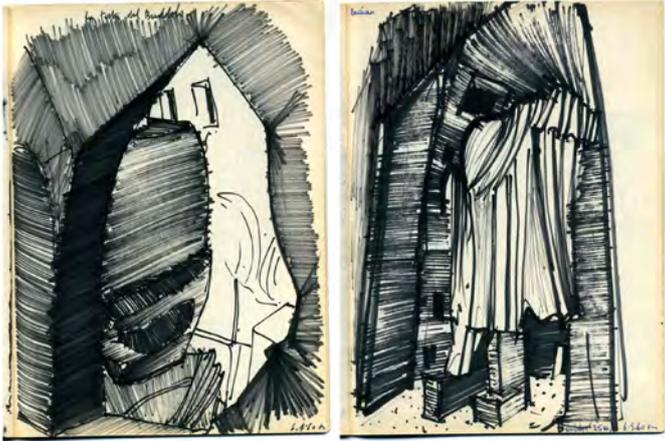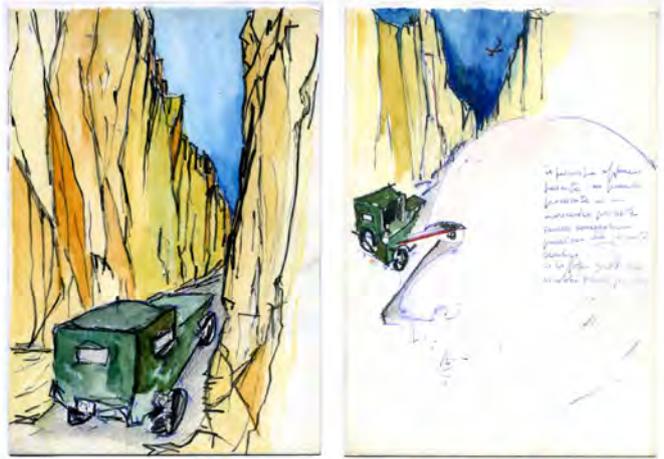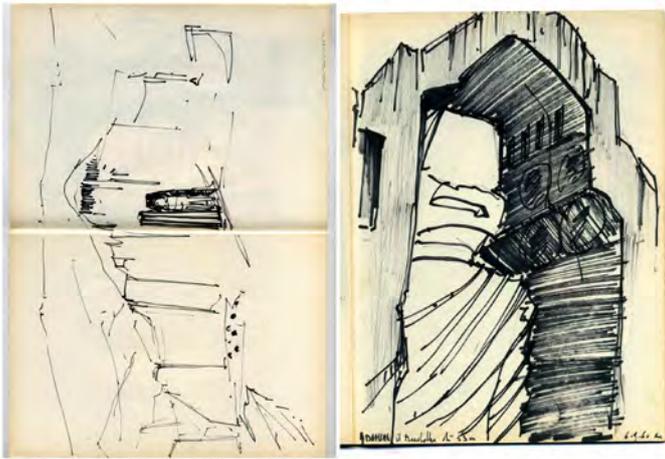
A. Bruno, The Great Buddha of Bamyan, 1960   A. Bruno, Heading to Jam, ca. 1962
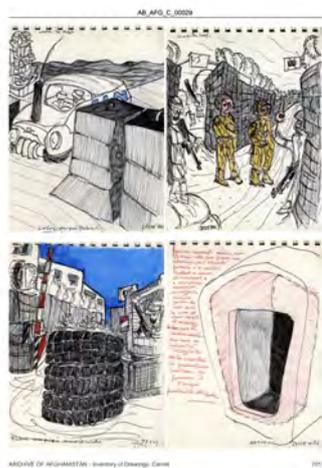
A. Bruno, Scenes from Kabul, and from the construction site of the Minaret of Jam, 2005

SKETCHES FROM THE SERIES ARCHIVE OF AFGHANISTAN - INVENTORY OF DRAWINGS: CARNET FILE (IUAV ARCHIVIO PROGETTI, ANDREA BRUNO COLLECTION)
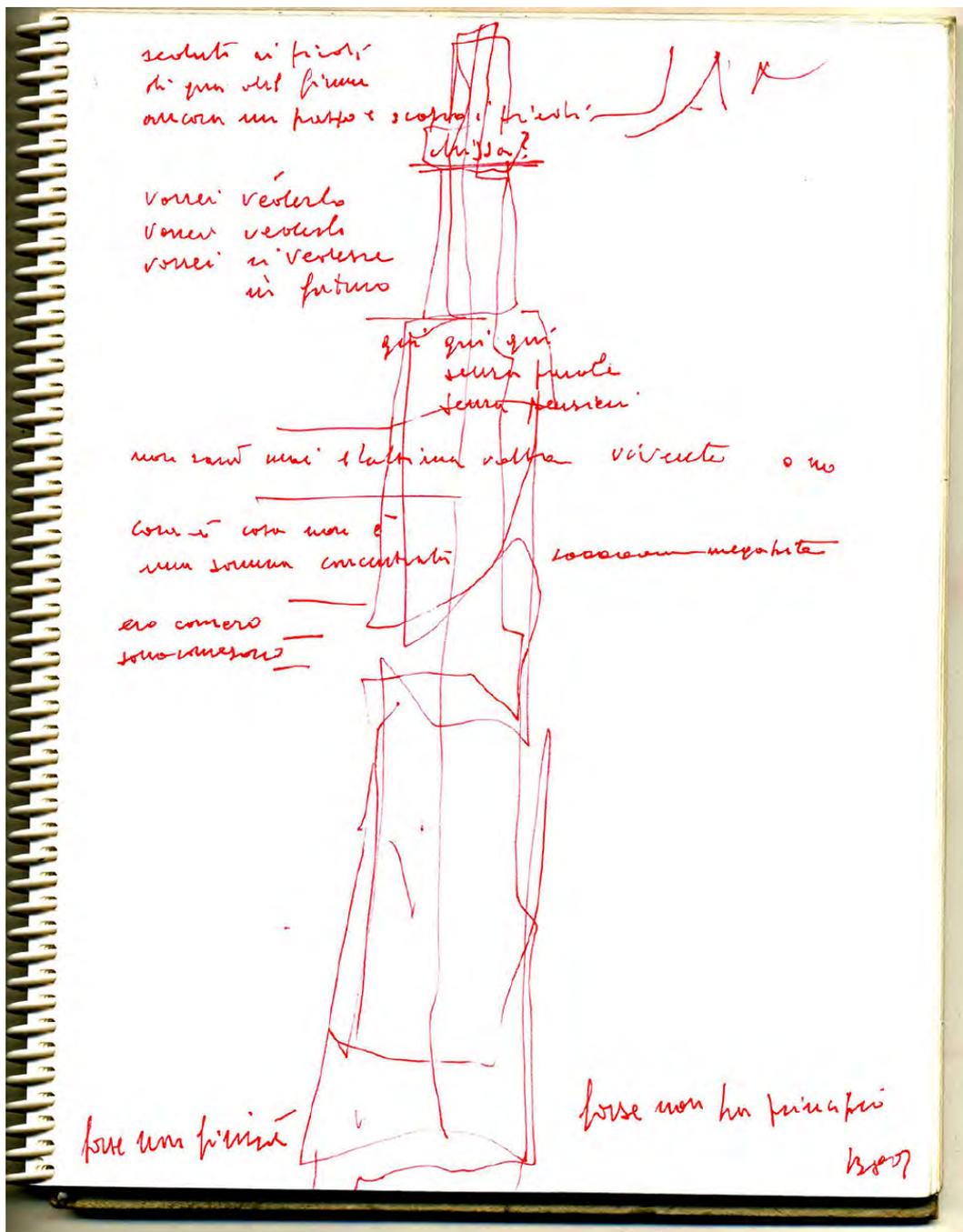
Notes on the Minaret of Jam, 2002, Sketch from the series ARCHIVE OF AFGHANISTAN - Inventory of Drawings:Carnet File (Iuav Archivio Progetti, Andrea Bruno Collection)

A. Bruno, Flight over the Bamiyan Valley. In the background, the cliff of the Buddhas, ca. 1960-1964

A. Bruno, Shot documenting one of the Bamiyan statues and its surrounding landscape, before its destruction in 2001, ca. 1960-1961

A. Bruno, The Minaret of Jam. The upward view highlights both the complexity of the decorative scheme and the critical state of conservation of the monument, ca. 1960–1964
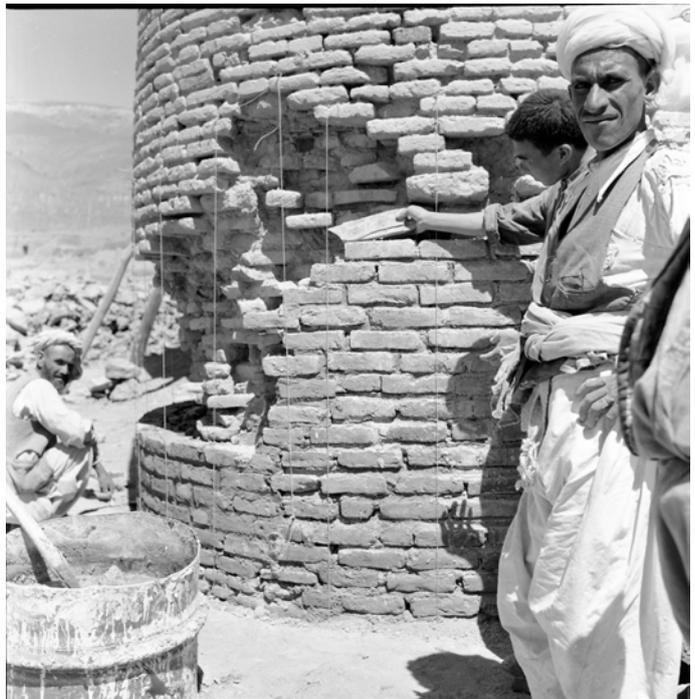
A. Bruno, Mausoleum of Abdur Razzaq in Ghazni. Workers carry out integrations of decayed masonry using new bricks, guided by plumb lines, ca. 1960-1966

PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN WITH A 6×6 CM ANALOGUE ROLLEIFLEX (IUAV ARCHIVIO PROGETTI, ANDREA BRUNO COLLECTION)

NOTES

[1] For a more in-depth understanding of Andrea Bruno's work, the following publications are particularly recommended: Di Giuda, Guseppe M., Dulio, Roberto, and Fabio Marino. 2023. *Andrea Bruno: opere e progetti (1956-2016)*. Milano: Electa; Danesi, Giorgio. 2025. *Il Progetto del limite. Tempo, materia e monumento nell'opera di Andrea Bruno*. Treviso: Anteferma.   [2] Regarding Andrea Bruno's travels and projects in Afghanistan, we would like to highlight the exhibition *Andrea Bruno Afghanistan*, curated by Giorgio Danesi and Sara Di Resta with Ugo Bruno, held at the Università Iuav di Venezia (Tolentini campus) from 19 February to 6 March 2025. We also draw attention to the forthcoming article: Danesi, Giorgio, and Sara Di Resta. 2026. "Andrea Bruno and Afghanistan: Memory, Restoration, and Cultural Landscapes between the 20th and 21st Centuries", currently in press for the journal *Restauro Archeologico*.   [3] Giuseppe Tucci (1894–1994) was one of the most authoritative and renowned orientalists, as well as a prominent figure in twentieth-century Italian culture. He was among the few who successfully combined the breadth of theoretical research with an uncommon organizational acumen, which culminated in the founding of ISMEO (Institute for the Middle and Far East) in 1933.   [4] See, "Renowned Italian architect Andrea Bruno talks about his New York drawings." Accessed November, 2025. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NlefYDskFBU&t=16s.   [5] See Janulardo, Ettore. 2020. *Andrea Bruno segni e disegni inediti*. Roma-Bristol: L'Erma di Bretschneider.   [6] The brief introduction to Andrea Bruno and his role in Afghanistan was written by both authors; the paragraph dedicated to the role of notebooks and sketches during the architect's travels and assignments in Afghanistan was signed by Fabio Marino, while the paragraph on the role of photography in the same contexts was authored by Giorgio Danesi.

CRISTIAN UNDURRAGA
CHILEAN ARCHITECTURE IN CONFLICT

Edited by Annalucia D'Erchia (Politecnico di Milano) and
Claudia Tinazzi (Politecnico di Milano)

an exhibition curated by
Massimo Ferrari and Claudia Tinazzi
with Alba Marcela Britez Cordoba and Annalucia D'Erchia

working team
Arianna Huaman, Giulia Martinelli, Alexia Melzi

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World Heritage Cities

for
Casa del Mantegna, Provincia di Mantova

models
Arianna Huaman, Giulia Martinelli, Alexia Melzi (Politecnico di
Milano - Mantova Campus)
BRG studio
Undurraga Deves Arquitectos Ltda

photo credits
Felipe Diaz, Ronald Halbe, Sebastian Mallea, Cristobal Palma,
Sergio Pirrone, Taller Pizarra, Roberto Saez, Pilar Undurraga,
Gregorio Vasquez, Guy Wenborne

18

Exhibition. Italian Connection section © Giuseppe Gradella
Retiro Chapel, Auco © Roberto Saez

ITALIAN CONNECTION

"We want to be a country and we are barely a landscape", said the poet Nicanor Parra, emphasising the pre-eminence of landscape over everything. Space – the freedom of space – is perhaps one of the most abundant assets of this earth. All this makes my notion of space very different from yours (from the Italian one). The idea of space in this *finis terrae* always refers to the scale of the landscape. That is why my recent visit to Rome was – as always – such a unique experience.

Exhibition. Before the city. The origin section © Giuseppe Gradella
Mapuche Social Housing, Santiago © Guy Welborne

BEFORE THE CITY. THE ORIGIN
The challenge we face as a society is to reconcile those
aspects in which globalization has brought progress for
humanity with the values inherent to the cultures that
preceded us and that today fight to keep their identity alive.

Exhibition. The history of a conflict section © Alba Marcela Britez Cordoba

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONFLICT
The history of a conflict
The rubble and debris from the Government Palace left a profound mark on our society. The wounds that were opened, the pain of the victims, and the mourning that followed keep the CONFLICT alive, more than 50 years later.

Exhibition. Cultural dialogue section © Alba Marcela Britez Cordoba
Palacio La Moneda Cultural Center, Santiago © Roland Halbe

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONFLICT
City and politics. The conflict
The Civic District project in Santiago, initiated in 1980 and
continued from 1995 to the present day, collects the rubble
and shards that fell there during the dictatorship, creating a
new urban landscape to celebrate the reconciliation of
Chileans – a project that also reflects the intimate relationship
between citizens and their public spaces, whose destinies are
inexorably linked. The plazas and do not resolve our conflicts,
but they offer spaces where we can come together.

Exhibition. Urban Conflicts section © Alba Marcela Britez Cordoba

URBAN CONFLICT

We must propose a strategy of cultivating the city. This entails responsible and sustainable development inspired by a collective ethic, one that rejects greed and short-term development strategies. It is in that practice where we will find the appropriate response for the urban future of the planet, and where we can stop the dangerous urban and social erosion, making our habitat a dignified and just place. The first problem is ethical... Only then can we think about the technical.
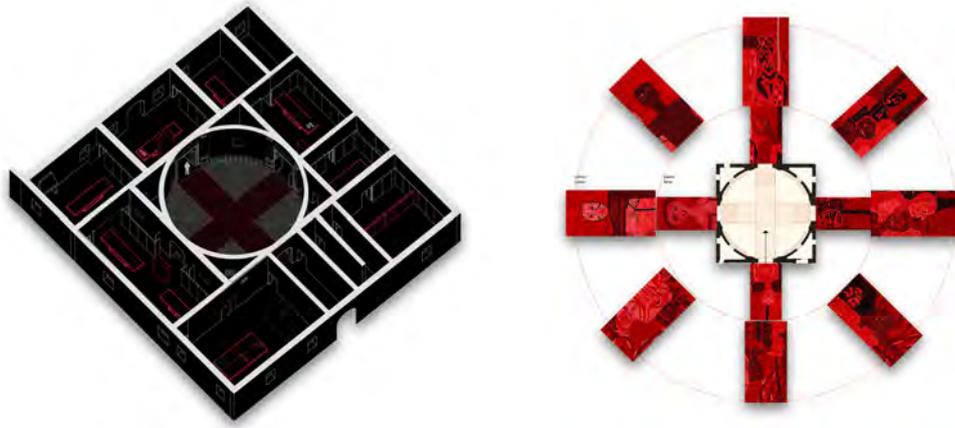
Exhibition set up Casa del Mantegna and coutyard. Omage to Violeta Parra

The exhibition reinterprets the work of Cristian Undurraga (Santiago de Chile, 1954) through the theme of conflict, which is so deeply rooted in Chile's DNA and complex history. Undurraga's work, generously supported by the Undurraga Devés Arquitectos studio founded in 1978 together with his wife Anna Deves, explores architecture as a complex system of themes that interact in a complementary way. These themes gradually evolve over time, alongside the cultural and technological progress of the world, to build hospitality as a permanent condition, deeply rooted and an integral part of the substance of architecture.

According to a threefold register and a multidisciplinary interpretation, the exhibition highlights selected projects from the Chilean studio's extensive portfolio that best embody the central role of contemporary architecture in various conflictual contexts, a role that stems from the certainty of the ethical value attributed to the work of architects in every era and in every latitude and longitude.

Identity in conflict, social and political conflict, and finally urban conflicts – like chapters in a singular narrative reflecting on the history of a *finis terrae* country – translate in this exhibition the many forms in which conflict manifests itself, binding populations, cities and architecture together.

As part of this narrative, made up of stages based on drawings, models, references and historical material, the work of the Undurraga Devés Arquitectos studio recognises, in its opening, the close link – both personal and, more generally, in terms of Chilean architecture – with our country, Italy, an important architectural and cultural reference point, especially in the country's rebirth after Pinochet's military dictatorship.

The exhibition, which has been hosted by Casa del Mantegna since 14 May 2025, has attempted to reach out to the various audiences who have visited the sequence of rooms that make up the house. Different possible routes have suggested different insights as well as different interpretations.
The exhibition interpreted the place that hosted it first and foremost in terms of the close connection between the spacious rooms that follow one another without interruption and the beautiful courtyard onto which these introverted spaces overlook.
The exhibition attempted to tell many stories: on the one hand, the architecture of a South American studio that decided to work – often silenciously – in the service of collective and social issues; on the other, the art of a South American woman, Violeta Parra, who fighting for social justice and the preservation of traditional identity in her country; and finally, the story of a country "where the earth ends".

MATERIAL AND IMMATERIAL DIMENSIONS OF THE CITY
CONFLICT, URBAN TRANSFORMATION AND HERITAGE IN CALI, COLOMBIA

By Santiago Araque Collazos (DAD - Dipartimento di Architettura e Design DAD, Politecnico di Torino)

ABSTRACT

The architectonic and urban organization is one of the most valuable sources of information available that portrait existing patterns and dynamics within a given human group. This characteristic contained by architecture and urbanism is present in times of peace but become particularly interesting in times of social tension and hostility, as they tend to materialize these phenomena into the urban landscape. Thus, the study of architecture and urbanism in complex scenarios could highlight, first social and cultural consequences that a given event has had on the community, and second, could point out opportunities for intervention and spatial renovation attempts that contrast the previously acknowledged consequences in their different dimensions. It is precisely this second point that transforms architecture and urban intervention into active peace building promotors, within torn scenarios trapped between overcoming the past or perpetuating present aggressive dynamics resulting from conflict. It is for this reason that the study and understanding of architecture and urbanism in contexts of conflict is of vital importance, especially when significant cultural sites are involved. As they have not only witnessed the beginning and development of the conflict but also tend to be urban symbols of collective memory and identity.

This is the case of Colombia, which has experienced since 1940s different waves of violence historiographical known, first as *La Violencia* and since 1960s as *Conflicto Armado Interno* (Inner Armed Conflict). These long periods of time, added to the impacts that years of confrontation have had in the cultural fabric of the country, have deeply marked the Colombian culture giving rise to architectural responses that reflect the polarization and social fragmentation that have characterized these periods. Thus, the following research seeks to analyze the Colombian city of Cali as case study, in order to understand the architectural and urban changes before, from 1910-1940, and from 1940s to the present day passing through each of the conflicts mentioned above. This process has allowed the identification of specific urban typologies that have been generated directly or indirectly from conflict dynamics. At the end, cultural heritage would be analyzed in this context as a tool that enables reparation and peacebuilding processes through memory preservation. This

new approach could contribute to the change in the vision of heritage and architecture from passive elements to active promoters of development and peacebuilding.

INTRODUCTION

The city, as structure is a complex construction where different dimensions coexist and determine the way spaces are inhabited and organized within a given territory. This means that urban spaces are not only physical or architectural configurations, but they are also containers of symbolic values, cultural practices, and shared memories that grant them meaning. These two realities, material and immaterial, therefore configure the dimensions that constantly generate and create the city, through a complex system of relations, influences, and interactions[1]. In this way, the urban structure can be understood, firstly, as a material projection of immaterial dynamics, composed of social, political, and economic processes, and secondly, it can be seen as a material structure that, in turn, conditions the ways in which immaterial practices manifest. This tight connection between material and the immaterial dimensions becomes particularly evident in contexts of crisis and conflict[2]. Since in these scenarios, urban processes tend to acquire the ability to silently adapt the impacts of violence, exclusion, and inequality, translating unstable social phenomena into lasting spatial configurations[3].In this sense, the study of the city and its architecture becomes a fundamental tool to understand the territorial consequences of prolonged conflicts, but also the way to enable intervention proposals upon the physical structure of the city that promote social changes that contribute to peacebuilding and social reparation in post-conflict scenarios.

In Colombia, these considerations acquire relevance, since throughout the 20th century, different episodes of political and armed violence have left deep marks both on the physical structure of the territory, urban and rural, and on the symbolic construction of the nation. The cities, especially those of rapid growth, became direct recipients of the demographic, economic, and cultural transformations that the conflicts stimulated. In these cases, the tension between modernization and inequality, between development and displacement, materialized in a fragmented urban landscape, where public spaces, dwellings, and architectonic compositions reflect adaptation attempts to a society marked by uncertainty. In this respect, the city of Cali represents a paradigmatic example of this relationship between conflict and urban transformation. Its accelerated process of expansion, which coincides with some of the most intense periods in Colombia's contemporary history, made it a privileged case study to observe how social and political dynamics are inscribed in the material city. Since the mid-20th century, waves of rural violence, internal displacement, and progressive spatial segregation have profoundly reconfigured its urban fabric, giving rise to new architectural typologies and to ways of inhabiting characterized by the constant search for security and belonging. Understanding these mutations implies, therefore, recognizing that each phase of its urban development constitutes a direct or indirect response to the conflicts that have traversed Colombian society, and that only through the joint reading of the material and immaterial dimensions, and especially of the urban elements that embody these symbolisms, such as architectonic heritage, is it possible to interpret the nature of these transformations and to project paths toward a construction of peace from

space. In this way, the present research has studied urban and architectural changes that the city of Cali has undergone during the 20th century, with special attention to the influences that the conflicts had through the generation of particular dynamics, which led to specific spatial responses that shaped the city and promoted a clear rupture with the traditional ways of inhabiting space that were present at the beginning of the century, and progressively abandoned in contemporaneity.

FROM COLONIAL TOWN TO REGIONAL CAPITAL (1910-1940)

Santiago de Cali, official name under which the city was founded by a Spanish expedition on July 25, 1536, was since its beginnings a small agricultural town located on the western slope of the geographical valley of the Cauca River. At the time, the new settlement joined a growing network of colonial towns structured along a north–south axis following the course of the Cauca River. From its earliest days, due to its distance from the routes that were connected to the colonial capital, *Santa Fé de Bogotá*, the city faced fierce economic and political competition from other settlements further north, such as *Cartago* and *Buga*[4] (fig. 1). Even so, the small town was founded to contribute to two main purposes: first, to exercise effective territorial, military and political control, and second, to integrate the area into the colonial economic system based on the agricultural exploitation of the extensive available plains, and the incorporation of the existing Indigenous population as workforce through subjugation. This system, known as *Encomienda*, granted large portions of land to families of Spanish origin, *Encomenderos*, who in return, oversaw the Christianization and teaching of the Spanish language to the Indigenous population[5]. Over time, these vast areas became economic units known as *Haciendas*, where the architectural typology of the *Casa de Hacienda* was developed. This architectonic typology is composed of a productive residential unit from which agricultural production, labor, and finances were managed[6].
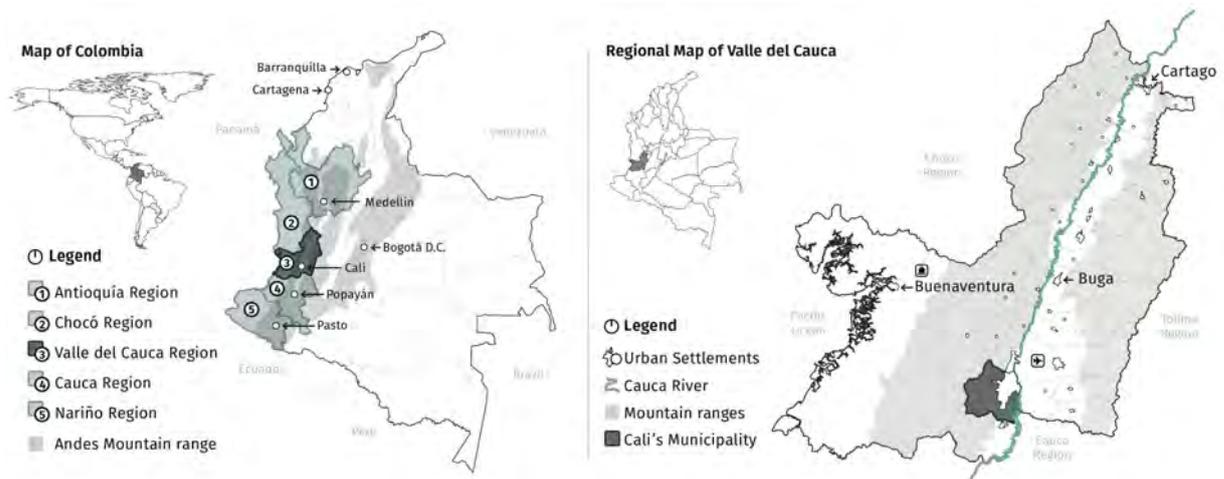

Figure 1. Map of Colombia and Valle del Cauca Region

In contrast to the rural space, Cali took shape as the urban center around which the large *Haciendas* revolved, serving as the seat from which the political and social power of the Spanish monarchy was exercised. One of the

legacies of this time, is the city's urban design, which followed the typical settlement model implemented by Spanish rule in its overseas territories, as defined in the *Leyes de Indias*. This urbanism was characterized by a square grid layout originating from a rectangular main square called *Plaza Mayor*, from whose corners the principal streets radiated, while the remaining rectangular blocks were laid out in parallel. In addition, the buildings of greatest hierarchy were to be concentrated around the square, forming a precinct around it. These buildings were mainly the major temples, the governors' houses, and other colonial institutions[7]. Today Cali's *Plaza Mayor* is known as *Plaza de Caycedo* and remains the city's central nucleus, around which important government and banking institutions are located. Simultaneously with the development of the town, the construction techniques and materials that characterized the colonial architecture emerged as a syncretism between Spanish models, locally available materials, and indigenous traditional construction knowledge. This gave rise to an architecture, sometimes defined as austere, that was usually characterized by thick perimeter walls in adobe built, which followed either the *tapia pisada* or *bahareque* techniques. These walls served as support for double-sloped roofs finished with clay tiles for the most important buildings, or with dry straw for humbler ones and were supported by wooden trusses[8]. Civil buildings, on the other hand, were required to maintain heights that did not compete hierarchically with religious buildings and their bell towers, which, together with the scarcity of economic resources, kept civil constructions between one or two stories. During the city's colonial period, from 1536 until the independence from the Spanish Empire in 1819, its urban layout and composition underwent few changes. The settlement expanded parallel to the *Plaza Mayor* but never beyond the limits of the Cali River to the north and what is today *Carrera 10* to the south. This urban composition contained, austere, that presented a strong rural-agricultural character, also experienced little alteration after the country's independence. On the contrary, a certain continuity persisted in the ways of occupying and building upon the territory, which preserved the city's image practically intact until well into the 20th century[9]. This urban stasis is reflected in the little demographic growth during the 19th century. In 1809, as an example, there were 7,546 inhabitants recorded, a number that decreased to 6,345 by 1830 and rose again to 11,848 by 1851[10]. Conversely, during the second half of the 19th century, the city experienced moderate growth influenced by two economic booms, caused mainly by the increasing demand for coffee and sugar in international markets. Which, in turn, reinforced major social phenomena that marked the history of Colombia. The first one was the *Colonización Antioqueña*, which consisted of waves of peasant migrations moving from various towns in the northern region of *Antioquía* southward, settling in previously unpopulated territories and founding plantations and towns (fig. 1). This process concluded toward the end of the century with the urbanization of the northern Cauca River Valley, which connected Cali with a web of cities now directly in contact with *Bogotá*[11]. The second one, was the consolidation of the railway system through the opening of *Ferrocarril del Pacífico* in 1915, which transformed the region into a commercial hub for Colombian products especially due to is connection to the Pacific port of *Buenaventura*. Thus, during the final years of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, a rapid industrial and economic expansion fostered significant demographic and urban growth. By 1910, the city had become the capital of the newly created region of *Valle del Cauca*, uniting the previous territories of *Cartago*, *Buga*, and Cali, counting a population in 1912 of 27,747 inhabitants, positioning it as the fourth-largest city in the country after *Bogotá*, *Medellín*, and *Barranquilla*[12].

CONFLICTS AND THE CITY OF CALI

Besides the economic and industrial development, conflict has always been a constant throughout Colombian history since the earliest moments of the country's formation in 1820, right after the process of independence from Spanish colonial rule. Even so, it was the conflicts of the mid and late 20th century that had the deepest impact on Cali's contemporary society, partly since they unfolded simultaneously with the city's most significant growth period. These conflicts are, *La Violencia* (1948–1958) and the Inner Armed Conflict (1960–Today). Over the years, both have given rise to urban forms and architectural typologies that directly respond to the immaterial social consequences generated by these events. Consequences that, in many cases, have been gradually naturalized by the civilian population. Next there will be a brief presentation of each of the conflicts mentioned before, with an emphasis on the social dynamics they produced and their consequences on the urban morphology of the *Valle del Cauca* region, and of Cali[13].

La Violencia (1948-1958)

The conflict known as *La Violencia* was a process characterized by the intensification in the confrontation between two opposing political ideologies, represented by the Conservative and Liberal parties. These two contrasting ways of understanding society, politics, and the state started to escalate their struggle throughout the 1930s, however, it was in 1946 that the dynamics which, two years later, would push the country into one of the most complicated political crises of the century began to take shape. In that year, the emerging Liberal political figure *Jorge Eliécer Gaitán* consolidated his position as one of the favorite presidential candidates. Although he lost the elections to a Conservative candidate, he succeeded in channeling the widespread discontent and loss of confidence in the Conservative Party, positioning himself as the politician with the greatest potential to win the following election four years later. However, in 1948, during a political speech in downtown *Bogotá*, *Gaitán* was assassinated, putting an end to all hopes for change and transformation that had been placed upon him. This event triggered a violent wave of uprisings known as *El Bogotazo*, which, although centered in *Bogotá*, quickly spread throughout the country, generating a series of rebellions and attacks that further exacerbated the already tense social atmosphere. In Cali, the news of the assassination caused spontaneous uprisings that resulted in the takeover of several public buildings. The city was only "pacified" a few days later through the direct intervention of the army commanded at the time by the general *Gustavo Rojas Pinilla*, who a decade later would become Colombia's only dictator during the 20th century. The reestablishment of government control in *Valle del Cauca*, as in the rest of the country, was accompanied by intense repression and political persecution of Liberals and their sympathizers[14]. This situation set off a chain of cause-and-effect events that led to the gradual flight of Liberal politicians to rural areas where they adopted, radicalized by the circumstances, armed struggle strategies against the Conservative government and its political and civilian representatives. This, in turn, encouraged the emergence of Conservative armed groups that operated parallelly to the government, with the idea of resisting the actions of Liberals who had taken up arms. However, these groups seeking to gain greater control and respect from the civilian population, gradually began to employ excessive violence in the shape of massacres, torture, persecution, and all kinds of atrocities. The impunity of

their actions, especially in urban centers, had a paradoxical effect, as it spurred the formation of more radicalized Liberal militias, that grouped in rural zones beyond state control. In this way, the dynamics of extreme violence spread throughout the 1950s, until around 1957, when *La Violencia* theoretically came to an end. As a result of the agreement between Conservatives and Liberals known as *Frente Nacional*, which consisted in the alternation of power between the two parties. It was during these years that *Cali* began to show the first signs of change in its urban structure, especially visible in the city demographics. In 1938, the census recorded a population of 101,883 inhabitants, the result of the steady increase in the population described above. This number, however, skyrocketed in the following years, particularly visible in the next census in 1951 that showed an increment of 25%, right at the height of the social crisis caused by *La Violencia*, reaching 284,186 inhabitants. This trend continued, and by 1964 the population had risen another 36%, reaching 637,929 inhabitants. In this way, the strong demographic pressure, not explainable by Cali's natural population growth, generated significant changes in the use of urban land, both within consolidated areas and on the urban periphery. Although population growth was already constant before, it was the dynamics generated by the violence that ultimately forced much of the rural population to leave their lands and seek refuge inside the city[15]. This, in turn, promoted a series of internal movements that altered the relationship of inhabitants with the traditional city spaces[16].

The Inner Armed Conflict (1960-Today)

At the beginning of 1960, although the political dynamics that generated the previous hostilities were partially resolved, it was the injustices caused by those solutions that would later lead to the reconfiguration of confrontations[17]. However, although the political pacts brought an end to the struggle between the Conservative and Liberal parties, it didn't contemplate the inclusion of new political forces to the government, thereby excluding them. Especially important were liberal sectors that in previous years adopted socialist and communist ideologies, partly inspired by the success of the Cuban Revolution in 1959. In Colombia, in 1960, two main rebel liberal factions had transitioned into a socialist-communist ideologies, these were located at the eastern regions of *Llanos Orientales*, and the central mountainous region of *Tolima* (fig. 2). Yet, although these groups had reached agreements with the government, they never truly laid down their arms; instead, they reorganized as rural non-belligerent, self-defense groups. However, the fear of a communist revolution eventually pushed the government to attempt to reduce the military capacity these militias had, which favored once again an increase in hostilities. Thus, in 1962, the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) was formed after the militias in the east, and in 1964, the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) emerged after the *Tolima*'s militias; and in 1970, the *Movimiento 19 de Abril* (M-19) appeared as an urban militia. Since then, this war, which remains active to this day, has passed through different stages, constantly adapting and reconfiguring itself, responding to both internal and external dynamics of the country. To better understand these processes, historians La Rosa and Mejía have divided the phenomenon into five phases, spanning from 1960 to 2016, followed by a proposed sixth phase covering past years:

1960–1982: Characterized by the emergence of the first armed groups and their initial attacks on the government and state institutions. Strong influence of the Cold War.

1982–1996: Marked by the significant growth of the ELN and FARC, and the creation of rural self-defense groups to contrast the actions of these militias. These groups are known as Paramilitares. The influence of the Cold War begins to lose relevance within the conflict.

1996–2005: The most intense phase of the conflict, defined by open war among all the actors and the central government. This period also saw, for the first time, the military and economic influence of the emergence of drug cartels.

2005–2012: A period during which the central government succeeded in deploying military forces effectively, limiting the control and territorial reach of the armed groups.

2012–2016: Characterized primarily by the peace agreement reached between the government and the FARC. These years coincided with a notable reduction in the overall level of violence in the country.

2016–Today: Since then, the country has witnessed a resurgence of hostilities due to the fragmentation of FARC dissident groups that rejected the peace agreement, along with a rise in violent actions against the state and the civilian population carried out by new groups seeking to control illegal economies.

Figure 2. Tolima and Llanos Orientales Regions

Throughout these decades, violence has had a significant impact on civil society, especially in rural areas where confrontations between armed

factions seeking territorial control are most common. As a result, the same refuge phenomenon reappeared, as people left unsafe territories and moved to cities, considered safer and distant from the countryside's violence. This idea was partially true, but it doesn't mean urban areas were exempt from direct attacks; in fact, they often became strategic scenarios used to pressure the central government. Consequently, large cities witnessed bombings, assaults, widespread destruction, and a deterioration of their social fabric, while facing intense demographic and urban expansion. These shifts deeply affected how Colombians perceive and relate to cities and their spaces. Cali exemplifies this process, as the main institutional center of southern and western Colombia, which has attracted conflict dynamics from regions such as *Nariño*, *Cauca*, and *Chocó*. This has generated an atmosphere of mistrust and paranoia, driving a persistent search for more enclosed and controlled environments perceived as safer. Over time, this altered traditional ways of inhabiting and understanding the city, first, through the abandonment of urban spaces deemed threatening, and second, through the rapid adoption of new residential and commercial typologies based on an inherently segregated urban model. Thus, immaterial phenomena arising from conflict-driven social disruptions have shaped new ways of living and building the urban landscape, defining the contemporary city as the material expression of these dynamics and giving rise to an urban form previously unknown[18].

URBAN AFFECTATIONS OF THE CONFLICT IN CALI

Figure 3. Map of Cali with its Historic City Center and neighborhoods

Presently, to understand the conflict's effects on Cali's urban composition, a regional documentary investigation was carried out in 2023. This preliminary analysis was later compared with the city's historical urban development during the same years, aiming to identify patterns and correlations linked to conflict-related events. As a result, it was possible to identify social dynamics that encouraged the adoption and spread of three architectural typologies, foreign to the city's traditional composition, and that shape today's urban reality. Although these typologies contrast with earlier city models, citizens rarely associate them with the conflict, attributing them instead to economic, social, or political factors. Additionally, it's crucial to highlight that these urban phenomena are not unique to Colombia but appear across Latin America and other regions. What stands out in the Colombian case, and particularly in Cali, is the unusual speed and scale with which these transformations emerged, reshaping the city in just 50 years and revealing

consistent links to conflict dynamics. The typologies are the following:

1-Progressive deterioration of the historic center, its neighborhoods, and traditional public spaces due to strong demographic pressure caused by the massive arrival of refugees, known as *Desplazados*. Initially, these newcomers sought to organize themselves within traditional residential houses located within consolidated urban zones, which were progressively adapted to accommodate a larger number of people. Over time, this constant cycle of occupations and interventions led to generalized deterioration of structures and the disappearance of distinctive architectural language. Gradually, the perception of these areas shifted, and they started to be seen as dangerous, obsolete, and degraded. As a result, former owners, no longer finding economic incentives to preserve the buildings, often decided to demolish them to make way for new functions, often counterproductive to the cultural values traditionally associated with the historic urban center. In Cali, this first phenomenon can be seen, particularly in the neighborhoods of *San Pedro* (around *Plaza de Caycedo*), *La Merced*, *Santa Rosa*, *El Calvario*, and *San Nicolás* (fig. 3), where numerous buildings remain until today in severe deterioration state or complete abandonment. Partial facadism can also be observed as the result of heritage regulation voids and improper transformations that ultimately lead to demolition of the whole structure besides the main façade. The rest of the now-empty plot is often repurposed, like parking lots (fig. 4). This loss of value and appeal is also reflected in the extremely low population density of the historic center, one of the lowest in the entire city.

Figure 4. Image of a facade in Cali's historic center, belonging to a historic building that has since been demolished. Photo taken at Carrera 8 No. 7-99A, formerly Calle de La Floresta

2- The second phenomenon is as a progressive consequence of the growing demographic pressure. Over time, the city's capacity to absorb new inhabitants decreased, particularly in terms of labor market integration. Unable to achieve economic stability, refugee population experienced a process of precarization that fueled increasingly aggressive and predatory forms of social competition, which in return increased insecurity levels in those same areas. Eventually, those unable to sustain themselves were forced to leave the consolidated city and seek informal refuge along its peripheries. These peripheral areas are gradually occupied and urbanized spontaneously, giving rise to informal settlements, *favelas* or *baraccopolis*. In Colombia, such settlements are colloquially referred to as *Invasiones* (Invasions), a term that reveals the negative perception towards these expanding areas. In Cali, the rapid growth of these zones is reflected again by the vertiginous population increase, especially between 1973 (991,549 inhabitants) and 1985 (1,429,026 inhabitants). Within just 47 years, from 1938 to 1985, Cali's population grew from 100,000[19] to nearly 1.5 million inhabitants, with a migration rate of 11 "newcomers" (not born in Cali) per 1,000 inhabitants, percentage that grew up to 15.5 by 1993. One of the most notable examples of informal settlements is *Distrito de Aguablanca*, located to the east, between the historic center and the western bank of the Cauca River (fig. 3). Historically, this area was a vast floodplain that began to show signs of incipient urbanization by 1950, though it failed to consolidate due to unstable ground conditions. Nevertheless, from 1970s onward, the area experienced accelerated urbanization, eventually becoming entirely occupied by informal neighborhoods. Today, this sector concentrates around 25% of Cali's 2,238,228 inhabitants in approximately 17% of the city's urban total area, which makes the area have the highest residential densities level in the whole city.

Figure 5. 20th Century Urban Developments in Cali around the Historic City Center

3- The third phenomenon configurates a response from the population that once inhabited the traditional neighborhoods. These inhabitants found themselves immersed in a rapidly transforming urban and social environment, where former cultural and material references were rapidly dissolving, firstly due to the city's expansion and secondly by the physical degradation of spaces increasingly perceived as dangerous. In addition, a general distrust started to emerge, fostered in part by the official narratives and the increasing violence linked to the conflict. This complex situation promoted a progressive exodus of traditional residents toward newly developed neighborhoods outside the consolidated zones. To distance themselves from contexts perceived as chaotic or unsafe, spatial separations were introduced to limit interactions with individuals considered "outsiders". In Cali, this phenomenon presented itself through the consolidation of middle- and upper-class neighborhoods toward the north, northeast, and south of the historic perimeter. Between 1940 and 1960 towards the southwest, the neighborhoods of *Los Libertadores, San Cayetano, Bellavista,* and parts of *Santa Isabel* developed around the *San Antonio* hill, an already established traditional neighborhood since the early 20th century. North of the Cali River, the neighborhoods of *Versalles* and *Juanambú* emerged, while *Santa Rita* and *Santa Teresita* were consolidated outside the historical perimeter of Cali (fig. 5). In this way, within a few years, the city greatly surpassed the boundaries that had contained it for centuries. Initially, these upper-class neighborhoods were designed to maintain a certain relationship with the surrounding public space, though in a controlled way through the implementation of a frontal garden called *Antejardín*, which separated the house interiors from the street. This element, entirely foreign to the previous urban model, distanced the residences from the dynamics that had always taken place on the streets, even though it still maintained a mediated visual connection using vegetation[20]. This model, dominant since the 1940s, changed again in the 1970s as public spaces' perception worsened, coinciding with the transition between phases 1 and 2 of the conflict described before. For this reason, a new typological response emerged, initially only in residential architecture, but later also expanding into commercial typologies. These new forms sought to withdraw completely from urban space through enclosed developments, composed of architectural barriers such as walls, fences, and vegetative perimeters. This phenomenon, known as Gated Communities, represented a strong rupture with the traditional urban model[21]. A clear example of this residential typology is the *Unidad Residencial Santiago de Cali* (URESA), built in 1971 (fig. 6). Considered to be the city's first gated housing complex, it became the reference model for much of the southern neighborhoods' development, even though it did not originally include perimeter barriers, these were added later for security reasons. As for commercial typologies, from the 1980s onward, the *Centro Comercial Cerrado* (enclosed shopping mall) gained popularity as a new way of conceiving commercial and recreational spaces. Although this typology in Cali was partly influenced by American malls, its interpretation, materialities, and spatial organizations reveal an attempt to maintain a degree of continuity with the imaginary of traditional city's commercial spaces. Such as large open-air pedestrian plazas framed by architecture and wide covered corridors accompanied by colonnades. As examples we can see *Centro Comercial Unicentro*, opened in 1980 as the first enclosed commercial mall, *Centro Comercial Cosmocentro* 1981, and *Centro Comercial Chipichape* opened in 1995 (fig. 7).

Figure 6. View of the controlled entrance to the URESA residential complex, located at Cra. 45a #5A-150, in Cali

Figure 7. View of one of the interior spaces of the Unicentro shopping center, where reflecting pools, indoor gardens, and wide pedestrian areas have been implemented

HERITAGE MANAGEMENT IN A WOUNDED CITY

Since the late 1990s, the contemporary Cali has consolidated itself as a deeply divided urban environment, where two parallel cities coexist, the first, with a consolidated urban origin, and the second of informal and precarious origin, where the highest rates of poverty and insecurity are concentrated. This spatial separation has, over time, generated divergent value systems, as well as contrasting ways of inhabiting and relating to urban space. Situation that added to the long years of conflict and war trauma, has formed a population that lives with caution and suspicion toward others, where "strangers" are perceived as potential risks to be mitigated through clear spatial, social, and economic divisions[22]. As a result, society has progressively become more polarized divided by increasingly distant positions, reinforced by radicalized ideological stances that continually give rise to violent confrontations, which exacerbate the perception of fear and insecurity throughout the entire urban landscape. In this way, Cali has come to be interpreted by its citizens as an accidental and inevitable result of history, incapable of being modified or renewed. However, the cyclical relationship of the material and immaterial dimensions that make up the city proposed by Sennett, shows that it is, in fact, possible to generate urban physical change through the promotion of new functions and social activities, since both systems are closely interconnected and constantly influence one another. In this sense, it becomes possible to promote spatial interventions that contribute to the gradual improvement of the entire urban system. Among the different possibilities that urban renewal may offer, buildings with significant cultural value, often recognized as heritage, present unique opportunities. These buildings not only occupy important positions within the urban structure, often due to their historical value, but are also widely understood by communities as cultural and identity symbols of vital importance. This, in practice, defines what can be understood as the dual nature of heritage, a condition that allows it to move fluidly between the city's material and immaterial dimensions. These dimensions are usually composed of stratified interpretations of the historical events that have unfolded around these buildings, projecting the memories of inhabitants into the material dimension of the city, connecting them to it and to its heritage in a subconscious level[23]. Today, Cali possesses 16 buildings declared as national heritage and 263 as local heritage, meaning they are recognized only at a regional level. This extensive network of structures, many in advanced state of decay and abandonment, offers the possibility of designing comprehensive intervention projects, that bring conservation needs into dialogue with valorization strategies aimed at regenerating Cali's social fabric, heavily affected by conflict's negative consequences. This transformative potential has been recognized in Colombia through the concept of the heritage social role, conceived not only as an intrinsic characteristic of heritage buildings but also as a necessary and inherent responsibility of any heritage intervention project in the country. Due to historical and social conditions, it is essential to include integral components that promote social development and a culture of peace, especially in spaces that have been scenarios of confrontations and atrocities related to the armed conflict[24].

This heritage responsibility to transform society arises partly from the need to provide effective means of reparation for affected communities, a notion that has been consolidating in Colombia for roughly two decades, when the preservation of memory began to be understood not only as a tool for reparation but also as a key factor in promoting non-repetition. In other words, it is a tool of fostering historical consciousness that prevents similar

dynamics from recurring in the future. Within this context, the sensitive intervention of heritage embedded in the city, which has witnessed the profound changes experienced over the past century, is understood as a fundamental activity capable of enabling social transformations and new ways of understanding and relating to the urban environment. However, identifying the possible functions capable of generating these immaterial changes remains one of the greatest challenges faced by such projects, as it requires a deep understanding of the unique social complexities of the communities that will inhabit those spaces. Fortunately, in 2022, the *Comisión de la Verdad de Colombia*, an institution established by the 2016 peace agreement between the government and the now-defunct *FARC* militias, consolidated in its final report a set of recommendations aimed at fostering a genuine pursuit of peace within the country. While these recommendations cannot be directly translated into specific project functions, they serve as guiding social objectives capable of inspiring innovative approaches and proposals that contribute to a more holistic and integrated understanding of the role of active architectural heritage in building a culture of peace in Cali and across Colombia.

CONCLUSION

Nevertheless, Cali is today a complex system constantly striving to overcome serious social and economic challenges, whose origins come partly from the difficult legacies of the past, but also from the resurgence of armed conflict in recent years. This has once again drawn the city into violent and destructive dynamics that, as in the past, have deepened social divisions, political polarization, and spatial injustices. These forces, in turn, threaten to further alienate the already complex morphological and architectural reality of the city. In response, the need to foster a culture of memory, reparation, and non-repetition becomes a matter of vital importance, to contrast the harmful materialized social dynamics that are still being generated. In this regard, the sensitive and socially oriented conservation and valorization of heritage represent a unique opportunity to generate significant social change capable, over time, of contributing to the regeneration of the immaterial components of society, which as seen before, would eventually be translated into physical improvements in the city's urban composition. At the same time, it is necessary for Colombian heritage conservation theory to develop methodological frameworks that put in dialogue, the protection and safeguarding requirements with valorization projects aimed to regenerate the social fabric of the city, while promoting an improvement in the life conditions in Cali. Only through this integrated approach can a genuine transformation of the way the city is perceived, understood, and lived be achieved. In this way, heritage conservation and valorization would take on an active role in the construction of peace, memory, and social and economic development.

NOTES

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SACRED SOVEREIGNTY
THE POLITICAL LIFE OF MONASTERIES IN POST-CONFLICT KOSOVO

By Qendresa Ajeti (Technical University of Munich)

ABSTRACT

In post-conflict societies, architecture often plays a crucial role in shaping narratives of identity, legitimacy, and reconciliation. In the case of Kosovo, following the 1999 conflict and the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the Orthodox monasteries such as Deçan which has become more than religious and historical landmark, they are deeply contested symbols entangled in questions of sovereignty, cultural memory, and political power.

This research explores how these religious sites operate not merely as passive remnants of the past, but as active instruments within ongoing political negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia. Positioned at the intersection of cultural heritage, international diplomacy, and nation-building, these monasteries illuminate the complex ways in which sacred architecture is mobilized in efforts toward reconciliation, or conversely, in the entrenchment of division.

Using the Ahtisaari Plan (2007) as a legal and political backdrop, this study analyzes the strategies by which both state and non-state actors, such as the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Serbian and Kosovar governments, and international culture heritage institutions like UNESCO engaged with these monuments. Methodologically, the research draws from heritage theory and critical memory studies, interpreting heritage as an ongoing and politicized process of meaning-making rather than a neutral preservation of the past. The findings reveal that religious heritage sites in Kosovo function as forms of soft power: they are mobilized to reinforce competing historical narratives, legitimize political claims, and influence peace-building efforts. This has broader implications for how international heritage regimes intended to preserve cultural monuments, can also become entangled in geopolitical agendas. The paper argues for a more critical and context-sensitive understanding of how architecture operates not only as a cultural asset but as a political instrument in unresolved conflicts.

INTRODUCTION

On the westernmost part of Kosovo, on the edge of Lumbardhi river gorge, at the foot of Bjeshkët e Nemuna mountains, in the picturesque valley of Deçan[1], stands the Monastery of Deçan[2] (fig. 1). The monastery was built in the 14th century, its limestone walls and Byzantine frescoes have survived six centuries of Ottoman rule, two Balkan Wars, two World Wars, and finally the

violent dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1999[3] (fig. 2). Yet perhaps no period during the history has made this monastery more contested than the years following the war of 1999 and the declaration of independence of Kosovo in 2008. The Monastery of Deçan is since 2004 enlisted a UNESCO World Heritage Site and from 2006 it is inscribed on the same list as World Heritage in Danger.

Figure 1. The valley of Deçan , on foot of the Bjeshkët e Nemuna mountains, Monastery of Deçan on the right © Ibrahim Berisha

Figure 2. The Monastery of Deçan, Deçan, 1327 - 1335, Kosovo Source:https://kktk.rks-gov.net/UserFiles/KKTK-190214171549/1/19/8bec3a21-1315-4029-ada6-3d807666d09clMG_3495.jpg

In the years that followed the Kosovo's 1999 war, the orthodox monasteries have repeatedly become a focal point of contestation and political debate

between Kosovo and Serbia, as well as among international institutions involved in the region. As Barrie argues about the sacred places, that even they are typically valued as peaceful settings for the cultivation of devotion, spiritual connection and personal improvement through the belief, the political and social role of these places is many times overlooked[4]. Religious meanings and concerns have had a prominent role in a wide variety of political conflicts in recent decades[5].

Understanding the political dimension of Serbian Orthodox monasteries in Kosovo requires recognizing the historically intertwined relationship between the Serbian Orthodox Church and Serbian state power. The Church's institutional foundations in the thirteenth century under Sava Nemanjić established a pattern of close alignment with state authority and political objectives that has persisted across centuries[6]. This historical trajectory has led scholars to observe that the Serbian Orthodox Church functions simultaneously as a religious institution and as a vehicle for national political aims, with its structures often serving strategic state interests[7].

This paper examines how the orthodox heritage in Kosovo have been instrumentalized as political tools to maintain influence in post-war Kosovo. Referring to that, it argues that the monasteries in Kosovo that are under administration of the Serbian Orthodox Church extends beyond its architectural and religious value.

This paper argues that Orthodox monasteries in post-conflict Kosovo function as instruments of "sacred sovereignty"—sites where competing claims of political legitimacy, historical memory, and territorial authority have materialized, contested, and negotiated through the language of cultural heritage. By analyzing an underexamined geopolitical context in heritage studies, Kosovo, and positioning it within broader theoretical debates on dissonant heritage in conflict zones, this research contributes to the international scholarship with its significance for understanding how cultural preservation mechanisms operate in contested places. The analysis argues that architectural heritage functions as an active agent in processes of violence, reconciliation, and identity formation. It reveals how international heritage frameworks, designed to protect cultural monuments, can become entangled in political debates, raising critical questions about their role in post-conflict societies.

The research takes as a case study the Monastery of Deçan, examined as a microhistory that reflects broader dynamics of the orthodox heritage in Kosovo, while acknowledging that each monastery possesses its own specificities. The paper addresses three interrelated dimensions of how they operate as instruments of sacred sovereignty: firstly, the legal protection framework established by the Ahtisaari Plan and Kosovo's constitution that grants the Serbian Orthodox Church authority over territory and development; second, the strategy of heritage diplomacy to block Kosovo's UNESCO membership bid; and lastly, the long property dispute over monastery lands that reveals how ecclesiastical property claims operate as territorial assertions constraining Kosovo's sovereign authority over spatial planning and economic development.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a variety of methods, combining document analysis, discourse analysis, and critical engagement with heritage theory.

The primary documents analyzed are legal and policy documents that include the Ahtisaari Plan (UN Security Council Document S/2007/168, 2007), Kosovo

Constitution (2008, 2016), Kosovo's Law No. 03/L-039 on Special Protected Zones (2008) with particular attention to heritage protection provisions, the Constitutional Court decision (2016) regarding the Monastery of Deçan property rights, the UNESCO Nomination Dossier for Deçan Monastery (2002), and UNESCO World Heritage Committee monitoring reports and decisions (2004-2023). These documents were issued by different institutions, Kosovo government bodies, Serbian authorities, and UNESCO, providing multiple institutional perspectives on heritage protection and sovereignty. They were selected for their direct relevance to the institutionalization of heritage protection mechanisms and their legal effects on sovereignty and territorial authority.

Then the methodology delves to the use of media and discourse analysis: Media sources analyzed include Albanian-language sources from Kosovo (Koha Ditore, K2.0, Evropa e Lire), Serbian sources (Politika, KoSSev, Serbian Orthodox Church website), and international media coverage (The New York Times, Associated Press, Balkan Insight). Materials were collected on focusing on coverage of heritage disputes, political statements about monasteries in Kosovo, UNESCO membership debates, and property conflicts. The discourse analysis examines how different actors frame monasteries and heritage protection: as endangered sites requiring international protection (Serbian framing), as instruments of territorial claims limiting sovereignty (Kosovo Albanian framing), or as "neutral" cultural preservation (international institutional framing). Analysis focused on identifying rhetorical strategies, narrative patterns, and the political deployment of heritage language. Sources were analyzed in Albanian, English, and Serbian. As an Albanian-speaking researcher from Kosovo, I bring insider knowledge of local contexts, while engaging critically with Serbian, Albanian, and international sources to provide balanced analysis of competing heritage claims.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Through the history, Kosovo's cultural heritage was subject of temporal, geographical, physical and symbolical forces[8]. Due to its ethnically diverse population, central location, recent historical changes and varied cultural heritage, Kosovo is often characterized as a reduced scale model of the Balkans [9]. During the most recent war in 1999, cultural heritage became a battleground for the region's deep-rooted fragmentations. As a result, the Kosovo conflict has condensed the notion of collective memory and common history. As Anthony D. Smith notes in a broader context, cultural heritage is often viewed as "a legacy belonging to the past of 'the other'", and in times of conflict, it becomes a target that adversaries seek to "damage or even deny"[10].
Rather than understanding heritage as a fixed set of objects or sites passively inherited from the past, critical heritage studies conceptualize heritage as an active process of meaning-making that is embedded in power relations. The concept of "Authorized Heritage discourse" of Laurajane Smith argues how the dominant heritage narratives privilege certain communities connection to heritage and obscure political processes through which designations are made [11]. In this terms heritage simultaneously functions as a source of identity and belonging while also creating boundaries that exclude others. The process of attributing meaning to the past through heritage designation is never performed neutrally but always serves contemporary political, social and territorial objectives. In the case of Kosovo, orthodox monasteries, have been deliberately mobilized to negotiate political positions, create divisions and

advance competing sovereignty claims.

Building on this understanding of heritage as contested terrain, the concept of dissonant heritage, developed by John Tunbridge and Gregory Ashworth, addresses the inherently conflicting nature of heritage that emerges when different actors attribute contested meanings and values to the same sites[12]. They distinguish between the past – what has occurred, history – selective descriptions of that past and heritage – a contemporary product shaped from history through selection and interpretation. This analytical distinction recognizes that dissonance is created each time something is designated as heritage, since the selection process privileges certain meanings while ignoring others. Southeast Europe exemplifies these dynamics with intensity. The region of Former Yugoslavia has experienced recent wars, ethnic conflicts, and territorial disputes that have made heritage dissonance highly visible[13]. Heritage, throughout these transformations, has been actively used to negotiate power, create divisions, and fuel antagonism among and within nation-states, Kosovo included. Especially, these discourse has been used in relation to religious heritage, where Orthodox churches have been associated with Serbian national identity and mosques with Albanian identity, turning sacred sites into symbols of ethno-national belonging and exclusion.
Taking into consideration these theoretical frameworks, this paper proposes "sacred sovereignty" as a conceptual framework for analyzing how religious heritage sites operate as instruments of political authority in contested post-conflict territories. Sacred sovereignty refers to the processes through which religious institutions, via their material presence in sacred architecture and their spiritual authority, exercise forms of territorial control and political power that operate alongside, overlap with, and contest state sovereignty.

Sacred sovereignty gets some defining characteristics distinguishing it from territorial sovereignty. First, it derives legitimacy from temporal depth and spiritual authority rather than from modern state formation, its claims are grounded in medieval religious history and sacred narratives. Second, sacred sovereignty operates through transnational religious networks that create authorities extending beyond state boundaries, enabling religious institutions to mobilize international support independently of state actors. Third, it is materially inscribed in architecture and landscape, with claims literally built into territory in ways that endure across political transitions and resist erasure.
In post-conflict Kosovo specifically, sacred sovereignty names the collection of legal mechanisms, spatial practices, symbolic performances, and international frameworks through which Serbian Orthodox monasteries function as nodes of Serbian authority despite Kosovo's independence. The Ahtisaari Plan's heritage protection provisions create legal foundations for this sacred sovereignty by granting the Serbian Orthodox Church power over land use, establishing protective zones that limit Kosovo's territorial control, and creating international oversight. These legal instruments transform religious sites from passive preservation objects into active institutional actors with legal standing and authority.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: FROM MEDIEVAL MYTHOLOGY TO THE 1999 WAR

The Balkans have been shaped by a complex interweaving of cultures, languages, and faiths As Michael Galaty observes. It has been historically positioned at a major crossroads and frequently subject to overlapping territorial claims and it's turbulent past continues to complicate the study and management of its landscapes and cultural heritage. Throughout history, including the present, state and imperial authorities have actively used heritage to challenge competing territorial narratives and assert control over space[14].

Kosovo's cultural heritage reflects this layered and contested condition. Medieval Orthodox monasteries, alongside Islamic religious and civic structures, formed part of a shared cultural landscape that predates modern nation-states. However, in contemporary discourse these sites have been retrospectively framed through competing Albanian and Serbian narratives of historical continuity, ownership, and custodianship. The orthodox monasteries in Kosovo, commonly referred to as Serbian Orthodox Monasteries, are imbued with explicit ethnic and national significance and occupy a central place within Serbian historical and cultural narratives. And with the Monastery of Deçan, notions of belonging to the monastery have never been exclusive. Across historical periods, Albanians in the region expressed connection to Monastery of Deçan and regarded it as part of the shared cultural and religious landscape (fig. 3).

The Monastery of Deçan was constructed between 1327 and 1335; it stands as one of the largest and most architecturally significant complexes of the era in the region. The church, including the dome, is 32m high, and during the medieval period it was known as High Deçani. From the outside, the church's construction is a mixture of Romanesque and Gothic styles, while inside it is covered with traditional combined drawings of Eastern Orthodox and Byzantine styles. The main architect of the Monastery of Deçan was the master Fra Vito from Kotor, a Franciscan monk, who decorated the monastery with many elements that distinguish Romanesque[15].

Figure 3. Albanians standing in front of the Monastery of Deçan, 1915. Source: https://www.koha.net/shtojca-kulture/shqiptaret-pronat-e-manastirit-te-decanit-rakiqet-dhe-kallogjeret-ruse

Medieval history plays a powerful role in modern heritage politics[16]. The Battle of Kosovo in 1389 became a foundational myth within Serbian collective memory, transforming Kosovo into a sacred national landscape through historiography, religious ritual, and epic poetry. The Serbian Orthodox Church, had a big role in managing the campaigns for the revival of the Kosovo Myth in the mid-1980s[17]. This mythology culminated in the 600th anniversary commemoration in 1989, when Milošević instrumentalized medieval symbolism to legitimize contemporary political claims, when Serbs gathered near the alleged battlefield on June 28th, carrying nationalist banners and paying tribute to fallen mediaeval heroes[18]. Remarkably, behind him on the podium was a row of Orthodox bishops[19]. This event marked a turning point in the rise of nationalist mobilization and the dissolution of Yugoslavia. It later shaped international debates on sovereignty, minority protection, and heritage rights.

During the Kosovo War the destruction of mosques, kullas the traditional dwelling of Albanians known also as "stone fortress", çarshia the bazaar district that functions as the focal point of community social and economic life, and others were used as a strategy to erase material evidence of the Albanian community's historical presence[20] (fig. 4). The displacement of almost one million people during the war created also a disconnection of the communities with their built environment. Remarkably, not a single Serbian Orthodox church or monastery was damaged during the 1998-1999 conflict itself. As the clerk of the Monastery of Deçan recalled, during the summer

when the peak of the fighting was going in the hills surrounding the monastery, the monks remained confined within the complex amid ongoing gunfire, there were no attempts to attack the monastery, nor was any damage inflicted on Serbian Orthodox churches in the area[21].

However, post-war dynamics reversed. Following hostilities in June 1999, dozens of Serbian Orthodox churches were damaged in revenge attacks. The March 2004 riots, during which approximately thirty-five churches and monasteries were attacked over two days, fortunately not the medieval ones, further cemented heritage's position as contested political terrain and catalyzed international attention to protecting Serbian religious sites[22] (fig. 5). It further cemented heritage's position as contested political terrain.

Figure 4. Panorama of destroyed Old Bazaar in Gjakova, 1999 Source: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/

Figure 5. Serbian Orthodox church of St. Elijah in Podujevo destroyed in 2004 Source: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/

THE AHTISAARI PLAN: LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR HERITAGE PROTECTION

The legal framework governing Serbian Orthodox heritage in Kosovo derives from multiple intersecting legal instruments operating at international, constitutional, and domestic levels. At the international level, four Serbian

Orthodox monuments in Kosovo—Monastery of Deçan, Monastery of Graçanica, the Patriarchate of Peja, and the Church of the Virgin of Ljeviša—were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2004 (Deçan) and 2006 (the others as extensions) under the designation "Medieval Monuments in Kosovo," and simultaneously placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger[23].

At the country level, the 2007 Ahtisaari Plan provided detailed provisions for heritage protection that were subsequently incorporated into Kosovo's Constitution (2008, amended 2016)[24] and operationalized through domestic legislation including Law No. 03/L-039 on Special Protected Zones (2008)[25]. These interconnected legal instruments create a multi-layered architecture wherein international heritage obligations, status settlement commitments, constitutional guarantees, and domestic legislation converge to shape heritage governance in ways that generate ongoing tensions between heritage protection, minority rights, and sovereignty.

The Ahtisaari plan placed a record amount of emphasis on preserving Serbian religious and cultural heritage while aiming for "supervised independence." The creation of Special Protective Zones around about forty Serbian Orthodox sites and limitations on land use and development nearby were among the main clauses. Among the plan's most significant provisions were the establishment of Special Protective Zones around approximately 45 Serbian Orthodox religious and cultural sites, restrictions on construction and commercial activities within these zones, specific institutional mechanisms granting the Serbian Orthodox Church consultative and decision-making authority over activities affecting protected sites, recognition of Church property rights with dispute resolution mechanisms, and provisions for international monitoring and NATO security presence at selected locations[26].

The placement of Medieval Monuments on the World Heritage in Danger List by UNESCO, represented essential safeguard responding to the threats against Serbian Orthodox heritage, IN the perspective of Serbia[27]. Serbian officials and the Serbian Orthodox Church argued that robust international guarantees were necessary prerequisites for any status settlement, the violence against Serbian religious sites and the symbolic significance of these monuments to Serbian national identity. The protective zones and institutional authorities were framed as minimal necessary protections to ensure minority religious communities could maintain their cultural and spiritual practices in conditions of safety and dignity.

From the Kosovo perspective, however, these provisions represented privilege protections for Serbian Orthodox heritage while providing less favorable frameworks for addressing the systematic destruction of Albanian cultural heritage during the 1998-1999 conflict. The special status given to the Serbian Orthodox Church, is viewed by many in Kosovo as embedding forms of Serbian institutional authority within Kosovo territory that complicate the exercise of sovereign governance. Critics note that while approximately 500 mosques and Albanian cultural sites were destroyed during the war, the international legal framework focuses disproportionately on protecting Serbian sites, creating perceived inequities in post-conflict heritage politics.

The Ahtisaari framework thus established the legal foundations for what this paper analyzes as sacred sovereignty: a configuration wherein religious heritage sites, protected through international legal commitments incorporated into domestic law, become nodes where competing claims to territorial authority, institutional legitimacy, and sovereign control are continuously enacted and contested. Rather than resolving tensions between heritage protection and sovereignty, the legal framework institutionalized these tensions, creating mechanisms through which unresolved political

conflicts over Kosovo's status are perpetuated through ostensibly technical heritage governance arrangements.

STRATEGIC INSTRUMENTALIZATION: HERITAGE DIPLOMACY AND TERRITORIAL AUTHORITY

Serbian Orthodox monasteries in Kosovo and their specific heritage status operates through interconnected dimensions of political engagement: diplomatic interactions within UNESCO frameworks and property disputes involving territorial authority. These dimensions were analyzed to reveal how heritage protection functions parallelly as cultural preservation and as a contested political arena where questions of sovereignty, territorial control, and national identity are negotiated between Kosovo, Serbia and international actors. While this analysis focuses primarily on the Monastery of Deçan, the patterns identified reflect broader strategies deployed by Serbian Orthodox Church.

The strategic deployment of cultural heritage in diplomatic contexts corresponds to what scholars describe as heritage diplomacy—the use of heritage sites, narratives, and protection mechanisms to advance political objectives within international arenas. Applying a heritage diplomacy framework helps to recast these dynamics within the political culture of international relations, while also acknowledging that contestation and cooperation are often intertwined rather than mutually exclusive. This approach therefore allows for a more analytically balanced understanding of heritage as both a site of conflict and a medium of negotiation[28].

According to the Kosovo perspective, Serbia has deployed the international heritage framework, particularly UNESCO, in ways that serve both cultural preservation and political objectives. The action of Serbia to nominate the Monastery of Deçan as a Cultural monument in the UNESCO List immediately after the war in 2002 and afterwards place it in World Heritage in Danger in 2006, and mentioning the country as just Serbia, creates debates on heritage protection and sovereignty questions. This international heritage diplomacy achieved its most visible outcome in 2015, when Serbia, together with the Serbian Orthodox Church, influenced Kosovo's bid for UNESCO membership. Despite Kosovo's application receiving broad support from member states, it fell short by merely two votes of the required two-thirds majority needed for admission[29].

Serbia's campaign centered on claims that Kosovo could not be trusted to protect Serbian cultural heritage and ongoing security concerns as evidence of institutional incapacity. The Serbian Orthodox Church issued formal letters to UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova emphasizing threats to medieval monasteries and arguing that UNESCO membership would legitimize what Serbia views as illegal secession from Serbian territory[30]. Serbian officials maintained that granting UNESCO membership to Kosovo while heritage sites remained endangered would contradict UNESCO's fundamental mission of cultural preservation. This framing allowed Serbia to position itself as the responsible protector of universal cultural heritage against an unstable entity unable to fulfill international preservation standards[31].

Beyond the immediate question of UNESCO membership, this campaign reflected broader tensions in post-conflict heritage politics. From one perspective, it reinforced questions about Kosovo's institutional capacity and

international standing. From another perspective, it demonstrated how heritage protection discourse can become entangled with sovereignty disputes.

The heritage protection framework operates through multiple mechanisms that create tensions between different conceptions of authority. The special protective zones established around Serbian Orthodox sites create spatial arrangements where international oversight, Serbian Orthodox Church authority, and Kosovo governmental jurisdiction intersect in complex ways. When development activities require Church consultation or approval, questions arise about how different forms of authority—state, ecclesiastical, international—interact and sometimes conflict within post-conflict territorial arrangements. This dynamic is exemplified by multiple infrastructure conflicts, including the Deçan-Plav road project connecting Kosovo and Montenegro, which was halted when construction within the monastery's protective zone was prohibited following Serbian Orthodox Church objections, demonstrating how heritage protection mechanisms can constrain infrastructure development deemed important for Kosovo's economic integration[32] (fig. 6).
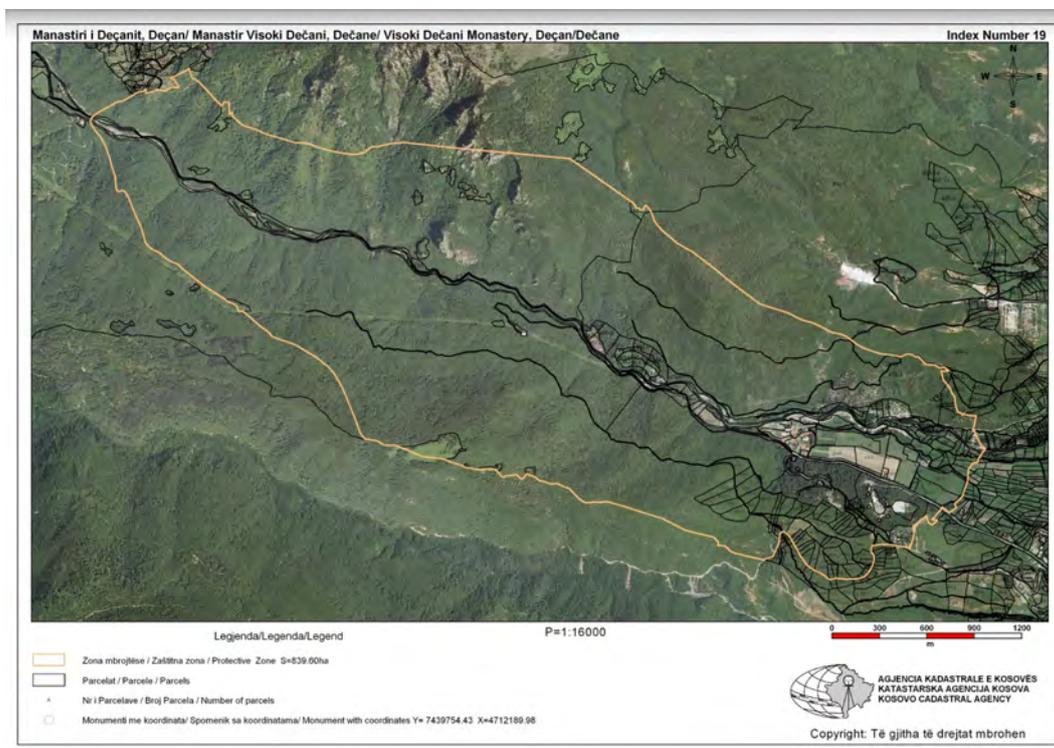
Figure 6. Map showing the protection zone of the Monastery of Deçan, established under Law No. 03/L-039 on Special Protected Zones (2008)

In the case of the Monastery of Deçan, the manifestation of heritage as a territorial instrument is related to property rights disputes. According to the Monastery, approximately 24 hectares belong to the property given in 1997 during Milošević's regime. On the other hand, it is contested by Albanians who maintain that this land was forcibly appropriated under Milošević's regime, a period when systematic discrimination against Kosovo Albanians was institutionalized through state mechanisms[33]. According to the Serbian narrative, the monastery's historical property rights were illegally confiscated during the communist period, and restoration of these rights represents

legitimate restitution rather than territorial expansion[34].

As a result of international concerns about safeguarding the religious heritage of minorities in the aftermath of conflict, the Ahtisaari Plan mandated that Kosovo set up dispute resolution procedures with clauses that strongly favored the return of property to the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Supreme Court Special Chamber decided in favor of the monastery's ownership claims in 2012. However, the government refused to implement it immediately due to strong public pressure and worries that this would set a precedent for many other property disputes in Kosovo.

In May 2016, the Constitutional Court of Kosovo ordered the full implementation of the monastery's property rights and ruled that the government's obstruction was unconstitutional[35]. However, to this day, local authorities in the Municipality of Deçan have not fully implemented the Constitutional Court decision, citing the justification that the land was taken by force during the Milošević era and that recognizing the monastery's claim would validate historical injustices committed against the Albanian population. However, the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Albin Kurti, requested that the Kosovo Cadastral Agency transfer the lands to the Monastery of Deçan, as per the court decision[36].

The land dispute of the Monastery of Deçan sheds light on sacred sovereignty as a political phenomenon from several angles. Firstly, it illustrates how areas of effective non-Kosovo authority are established within Kosovo's borders, thanks to property rights and upheld by the country's constitutional framework. Despite strong public opposition, the monastery, supported by the Serbian Orthodox Church and Serbian government, can make legal claims that the democratically elected government of Kosovo cannot override. Secondly, it illustrates how the concrete political realities of post-conflict societies, characterized by intense animosity, conflicting historical narratives, and unanswered questions about who has legitimate authority over territory, collide with the abstract legal principles valued in international discourse, including the rule of law, property rights, and international commitments. Thirdly, it demonstrates how monasteries operate as active material and legal actors with institutional standing, property rights, and the ability to make claims that directly challenge and limit the authority of the Kosovo state, rather than just serving as passive symbols.

Together, these dimensions—international heritage diplomacy through UNESCO and territorial assertions via property disputes demonstrate how heritage protection operates as a comprehensive political strategy. Heritage protection thus functions not as neutral technical preservation but as a contested political arena where unresolved sovereignty disputes continue to be negotiated through the ostensibly apolitical language of cultural preservation and international heritage frameworks. Both sides deploy heritage discourse strategically: Serbia to maintain influence and constrain what it views as illegitimate independence; Kosovo to demonstrate state capacity and challenge what it perceives as externally imposed limitations on territorial authority.

CONCLUSION

The concept of "sacred sovereignty" highlights how religious authority, historical memory, and territorial politics become mutually constitutive in contexts of contested statehood. In Kosovo's monasteries, multiple overlapping authorities—state, ecclesiastical, international—exercise

competing powers over the same territory, creating hybrid sovereignty arrangements characteristic of unresolved post-conflict situations. These sites exemplify dissonant heritage at its most politically charged: the same monuments evoke radically different meanings, memories, and claims to legitimacy depending on one's position within the conflict. As Tunbridge and Ashworth theorized, such dissonance is not aberrant but intrinsic to heritage itself—yet in Kosovo, this inherent contestation is amplified by unresolved sovereignty, transforming cultural sites into active instruments of political struggle rather than neutral objects of preservation.

The international heritage framework in Kosovo, particularly UNESCO's involvement and the Ahtisaari Plan's protections, was designed to facilitate peace-building by ensuring the protection of Serbian cultural heritage in independent Kosovo. However, implementation has often reinforced division rather than enabling reconciliation. Protective zones inscribe ethnic boundaries into the landscape while generating resentment among Kosovo Albanians who perceive sovereign authority as constrained, even as Serbian communities view these protections as minimal safeguards for endangered heritage in a hostile environment.

This reveals fundamental tensions in heritage-based approaches to peace-building in contested territories. When heritage sites are deeply embedded in nationalist narratives, function as territorial claims, and require international oversight limiting state sovereignty, heritage mechanisms risk perpetuating conflict dynamics rather than resolving them. More critical heritage practice in post-conflict contexts would require explicit acknowledgment that heritage discourse is inherently political and that preservation decisions reflect power relations rather than neutral technical choices.

The monasteries of Kosovo will remain contested as long as broader sovereignty disputes remain unresolved. Their protection is important—they represent remarkable medieval achievements deserving preservation. This case has implications beyond Kosovo: wherever heritage sites become entangled in territorial disputes, similar dynamics of sacred sovereignty, heritage diplomacy, and politicization of protection regimes emerge, requiring critical engagement with how architecture operates as a political instrument in unresolved conflicts.

NOTES

[1] The names of the river and mountains are given in the Albanian language. The translation for Bjeshkët e Nemuna mountains would be the Accursed Mountains in English. In Kosovo, all places, including Kosovo itself, have Albanian and Serbian names. In this text, I adopt the Albanian place-name forms, reflecting my first language and cultural context. Where appropriate, the Serbian equivalents are indicated for reference. [2] In the Serbian language, it is known as Manastir Visoki Dečani. [3] For the last war in Kosovo during 1998-1999, not a single Serb Orthodox church or monastery in Kosovo was damaged or destroyed by Albanians during the war. For more information, see Riedlmayer, András. 2014. "Introduction." In *Destruction of Islamic Heritage in the Kosovo War*, *1998-1999*, *by Sabri Bajgora*, edited by Robert Elsie and Petrit Selimi, 15-19. Pristina: Interfaith Kosovo, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kosovo. [4] Barrie, Thomas. 2012. 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CARTOGRAPHIES OF ABSENCE *CINEMATIC PALIMPSESTS IN THE SHADOW OF PALESTINIAN RUINS*

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ABSTRACT

Some cities become faded on maps but solid in frames.
In Palestine, where walls rise and streets vanish, cinema becomes a quiet act of preservation, drawing invisible geographies, retracing erased architecture, and resisting the forgetting of place. Even the name 'Palestine' is burdened by a long history of attempted erasure, spoken less in official registers than in stories, memories, and films that refuse to forget.

This essay explores the defiant clarity of cinematic urbanism as a spatial response to conflict and colonial fracture. In cities where architecture is continually dismantled or denied, films such as *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (Elia Suleiman), *Salt of This Sea* (Annemarie Jacir), *5 Broken Cameras* (Emad Burnat and Guy Davidi), and so many others construct palimpsests of space and memory. In their sequences, ruins are not endings; they are beginnings: visual traces reassembled through rhythm, cut, and gaze.

Here, the screen becomes a surrogate ground, a fragile but enduring terrain where the memory of place survives through displacement. Beneath each cinematic layer lies a negotiation between conflicting histories, postcolonial wounds, and the artist's own interior unrest, a condition where architecture becomes less about building and more about holding onto the possibility of return.

As Jacques Derrida reminds us, the archive is never neutral; it shelters presence while inscribing absence. Palestinian cinema becomes such a counter-archive: one that resists disappearance not through reconstruction, but through trace, sequence, and affect.

In the spirit of Edward Said's *contrapuntal vision*, where exile gives rise to overlapping temporalities and spatial imaginaries, these films inhabit dissonance; they do not seek to restore the city but to reimagine it in fragments, in shadows, in rhythms of remembrance. What emerges is not a traditional palimpsest of historical layers, but a contrapuntal palimpsest—a cinematic space where multiple narratives, memories, and absences coexist in tension. The visible and the erased, the remembered and the forbidden, the city as it was and as it is dreamt—these elements remain suspended, discordant, and alive.

Guided by Lefebvre's spatial theory, Kracauer's cinematic memory, and Bruno's emotional cartographies, this contribution frames cinema not only as witness but also as architect: a medium of resistance, a vessel of memory, and

a poetic structure in a landscape of uncertainty.
In Palestine, where reconstruction is often forbidden, and even the name must be defended, narration endures. And through that narration, the city is not only remembered but also rebuilt in vision.

INTRODUCTION: THE CINEMATIC COUNTER-ARCHIVE OF ERASED SPACE. THE POLITICAL TERRITORY OF ABSENCE

When the physical construction of a city is systematically dismantled, denied, or overwritten by colonial geometry, architecture shifts from a material practice to a function of memory. The central thesis of this essay explores the defiant clarity of cinematic urbanism as a spatial response to conflict and colonial fracture. In the context of Palestine, where systemic land appropriation and mass expulsion date back to the late 19th century and culminated in the *Nakba* of 1948[1], the built environment is only defined by vulnerability[2], as there is no permanence. This perpetual state of precarity creates a profound paradox: cities and villages[3] become faded on official registers[4], which are a conceived space, while they remain absolutely solid in the frames of cinema, representing a lived space.
This crisis of material space necessitates a Lived Space intervention, which can be a Cinematic intervention. Since architecture is continually dismantled or denied, the screen emerges as a crucial medium for architectural preservation and sometimes resistance. It functions as a surrogate ground where memory, political dissonance, and affective attachment coalesce, resisting the forgetting of place. The deliberate political function of Palestinian film is to serve as a counter-archive. While Jacques Derrida observed that the traditional archive shelters presence while simultaneously inscribing absence, the physical and legal archives governing Palestinian land are often inherently colonial, documenting and legitimizing erasure. Therefore, the cinematic archive must be deliberately non-neutral; its purpose is not only preservation for posterity but also an active, political refusal of the terms of colonial fracture. It resists disappearance not through material reconstruction, but through visual trace and profound affect.

THE CONTRAPUNTAL PALIMPSEST

Films, in this case, are always constructing palimpsests of space and memory. By studying them closely, one can see that ruins and visual traces get reassembled through rhythm, cut, and gaze. These traces do not seek to restore the city to a singular, harmonious past, but rather to reimagine it in fragments and in shadows. Guided by Edward Said's contrapuntal vision[5], the analysis defines the contrapuntal palimpsest as the resulting cinematic space. This is an architectural imaginary where multiple, conflicting narratives, the built and the erased city, the remembered street and the forbidden border, coexist in productive tension[6], allowing for a nuanced reading of cinematic spaces in which colonial wounds and the artist's interior unrest are mapped onto the urban environment. Cinema becomes a witness and also an architect: a medium of resistance and a poetic structure in a landscape of uncertainty, informed by Henri Lefebvre's spatial theory[7], Siegfried Kracauer's cinematic memory[8], and Giuliana Bruno's emotional cartographies[9].

MAPPING THE TENSION BETWEEN PLACE AND MEMORY. SAID'S CONTRAPUNTAL VISION AND THE SPATIAL IMAGINARY

Edward Said's concept of the contrapuntal originates in the musical term 'counterpoint,' allowing for simultaneous, interwoven melodic lines[10]. Applied to spatial and political studies, one can find it beneficial for understanding the Palestinian experience of exile and statelessness. Displacement creates a double-vision, where the critic or artist sees the present 'here and now' simultaneously with 'what has been left behind.' The cinematic frame, acting as a site for this double perspective, allows discordant spatial realities, such as an Israeli-built settlement existing alongside the memory and lands of a destroyed or dispossessed Palestinian village; for instance, the expansion of the settlement *Modi'in Illit* onto the agricultural land of *Bil'in* documented in *5 Broken Cameras*, the third cinematic layer of the analysis to play out without seeking immediate resolution. This conceptual tension is also powerfully illustrated in the second cinematic layer addressed later in the article, *Salt of This Sea*, when the protagonist, *Soraya*, visits her ancestral *Jaffa* home, which is currently occupied, forcing a confrontation between her remembered space and the actual contested reality (fig. 1).

Figure 1. Still from Salt of This Sea (Milh Hadha al-Bahr, dir. Annemarie Jacir, 2008), screenshot at 1:16:00 (image enhanced by AI)

This sustained dissonance functions as a form of political resilience. Said's contrapuntal method aligns with Willem Frederik Wertheim's counter-values [11], protests against the dominant value profile. In cinematic urbanism, the dominant colonial value is represented by order, sterile security, and clean geometry. The cinematic resistance is the assertion of dissonance and fragmentation as a deliberate counter-value. The treatment is thus not harmony or restoration but sustaining the tension itself, thereby keeping the possibility of the erased city alive in a state of suspended disagreement.

DECIPHERING LIVED SPACE

Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad provides the critical apparatus for analyzing the colonial struggle over land. The triad divides social space into three interconnected facets: Spatial Practice, Representations of Space, and Representational Space. The colonial project operates primarily through the 'Representations of Space' (or conceived space). This is the domain of state planning, official maps, and the systematic design and construction of monumental structures of control, such as the Separation Barrier. This conceived space dictates and attempts to confine 'Spatial Practice' (perceived space), which governs daily movement, economic life, and the physical friction encountered at checkpoints and borders. Crucially, Palestinian cinema wages its struggle in the third realm: 'Representational Space' (or lived space). This is the space of ideology, resistance, art, and memory, where "ideologies of spatial attachment [...] transcend a particular place." Colonial fracture is fundamentally a war waged in the official 'Representations of Space'. If the physical reality (Spatial Practice) is continually destroyed or appropriated, cinema utilizes 'Representational Space' to fight back.

The cinematic form, with its inherent discontinuity of frames and shots, is predisposed to capturing the disjuncture of memory and narrative temporality, according to Siegfried Kracauer. This fragmentation mirrors the psychological and spatial fragmentation of the homeland itself. Giuliana Bruno's emotional cartography emphasizes the connection between inner unrest and external landscape, insisting that 'sight' and 'site' are irrevocably connected. The metropolis itself exists as emotional cartography, a site of transport. This displacement forces interior unrest, which is then mapped cinematically. Architecture, in this context, becomes less about building and more about embodying the possibility of return.

CALVINO'S FRAGMENTED GEOGRAPHY AND UTOPIAN RESISTANCE

Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*[12] provides a necessary literary analogue to the cinematic strategy of using fragmented narrative to resist state-imposed order. The novel, composed of miniature urban sketches presented as dialogues between *Marco Polo* and *Kublai Khan*, replaces the closed, static spaces of traditional utopias with a 'fragmented spatiality of inexhaustible potential'. Calvino's cities exist as a collection of 'memories, desires, signs of a language' embodying the targeted core concerns: "Memory is redundant: it repeats signs so that the city can begin to exist".

This assertion that the city only begins to exist through the repetition of memory aligns perfectly with the cinematic counter-archive. The struggle in Palestinian film is not just to record reality, but to repeat the visual signs of existence, the enduring domestic interior, the sight of the lost sea, the perpetual protest, until the city re-forms in the collective consciousness. Calvino's fragmented geography thus reinforces the cinematic method of resistance against uniform imperial order.

THE CARTOGRAPHIC CONFLICT

The history of architectural plans and maps reveals their transformation from practical design tools, intended as a graphic conversation between the architect and the builder[13], into profound instruments of political control. Within Lefebvre's framework, maps belong to the abstract domain of 'Representations of Space,' enabling power structures to govern populations through precise calculations of territory and surveillance[14]. Architecture itself can simultaneously invent new relations of power and make their cartography that describes them within their context[15]. Historically, cities that grew organically were mapped retrospectively. The modern, colonial shift introduced a new paradigm, one in which the city was designed through premeditated cartography before construction.

While this development also reflects the rise of professional urban and regional planning aimed at improving infrastructure and livability, it simultaneously enabled forms of control and surveillance through spatial standardization. The map becomes not merely a planning tool but an administrative instrument through which the state could visualize, calculate, and regulate its territory. This premeditation facilitates control. The new, official map can sometimes systematically exaggerate the power, the coherence, and the majesty of the ruling state while imposing a standardized, abstract concept of space (kilometers, miles) that conflicts with vernacular practices. The state seeks to define a geography more amenable to state control (state space) against a geography intrinsically resistant to state control (nonstate space)[16].

This deliberate overwriting creates a profound cartographic conflict. The map asserts a new, clean script over the older, Lived Space[17], leading to the violence inherent in the palimpsest metaphor. The palimpsest concept suggests that while the new, dominant map attempts to erase history, it ensures the co-existence of several different scripts, meaning older maps and histories remain beneath the surface, creating a multivocal cultural landscape[18]. Palestinian cinema exploits this tension, using the visual field to bring the erased layers back into focus, fighting the 'Representations of Space' imposed by the state with the raw power of 'Representational Space'. The shift in cartographic sovereignty, the transition across registers from Palestine to Israel, was not a punctual event but a gradual, protracted process achieved through cumulative, strategic tactics (fig. 2).

The preceding theoretical discussion establishes the fundamental conflict: the necessity of the contrapuntal palimpsest as a response to the colonial state's cartographic violence. The following analysis now transitions from abstract theory to methodological application, demonstrating how this framework is actively deployed through specific cinematic compositional strategies. The three films analyzed do not merely document absence; they utilize their structural division, affective mapping, and cinematic language to perform the very theoretical resistance outlined above. *Elia Suleiman*, in his 1996 feature, *Chronicle of a Disappearance*, serves as the foundational case, transforming the camera itself into the ultimate tool of spatial resistance, using fragmentation and the extended long take to build a defiant counter-geography out of the domestic, the mundane, and the silent protest of everyday life.

Figure 2. Composite image showing historical British map of Palestine overlaid on current satellite view (Google Earth). Overlay created using Google Earth's "Image Overlay" tool to illustrate the cartographic conflict between state-imposed and lived geographies

THE FIRST CINEMATIC LAYER: CHRONICLE OF A DISAPPEARANCE (1996)

Elia Suleiman's first feature film documents a diary of restlessness. He traces his return to the *West Bank* after a long absence, set during the tense period following the assassination of *Yitzhak Rabin*. The film rejects conventional narrative, utilizing a series of barely connected vignettes and sketches that embody the restlessness and uncertainty associated with Palestinian statelessness. This fragmentation metaphorically reflects the psychological and spatial fragmentation of the homeland itself. The film is structurally divided, shifting between the light, domestic tone of the '*Nazareth Personal Diary*' and the more ideological '*Jerusalem Political Diary.*' This oscillation maps the schizophrenia of '*post-Oslo*' Palestinian life[19], where the comfort of a real home with a garden remains difficult to sustain. The challenge of capturing this return is best framed by *Calvino's Aglaura*, where the traveler observes the dichotomy between the conceptual city and the physical one:

> The city that they speak of has much of what is needed to exist, whereas the city that exists on its site, exists less [...] the recollection of the other, in the lack of words to fix it, has been lost[20].

61

THE CINEMATIC INTERVENTIONS OF THE NAZARETH DIARY

The four vignettes from the '*Nazareth: Personal Diary*' collectively function as precise cinematic interventions that assert 'Representational Space' (Lefebvre's lived and remembered domain) against the systemic 'Representations of Space' (official, colonial order) that seek to erase or defile Palestinian identity[21]. This is a unified analysis demonstrating how these scenes construct a Contrapuntal Palimpsest.

The Auto Mechanic Scene: The vignette featuring the mechanics, the broken car, and Samira Saïd's love song '*Aywa Bashta'alak Sa'at*' is a potent example of affective mapping colliding with mundane Spatial Practice. The scene juxtaposes the gritty, physical reality of manual labor in a dusty garage with the extreme, intimate emotionality of the classical Arabic love song. This dissonance embodies the double-vision of the Palestinian experience: the men see the present here and now (the broken car) simultaneously with the lost object of love and longing ("what has been left behind," i.e., the whole, sovereign homeland). The car itself becomes a surrogate ground for the wounded nation. By pouring their romantic yearning into the mechanical repair, the men transform an act of maintenance into an act of profound care for the non-material city (fig. 3). The song transforms the mundane workspace into a vibrant 'Representational Space' defined by collective memory and political desire, resisting its categorization as mere labor in the official colonial economy.

Figure 3. Still from Chronicle of a Disappearance (Sijill Ikhtifā', dir. Elia Suleiman, 1996), at 00:08:0

The discussion of the Nazareth man writing his PhD thesis on '*How a Man Pees*' relates directly to Calvino's fragmented geography and the idea of discourse as existence. Calvino's city, *Aglaura*, exists more strongly in its discourse than in its physical reality. The men's discussion of the absurd PhD is a form of discourse that the community takes pride in, asserting a local identity and intellectual sovereignty entirely divorced from political discourse. The city of *Nazareth*, as a site of free thought, is fixed and preserved by this absurd anecdote, preventing its true essence from being "lost in the lack of words to

fix it." By applying the highest form of intellectual rigor (the PhD) to the most uncontrollable bodily function, the men assert a cultural space that is inherently non-subservient to colonial geometry. It is an absurd, yet vital, declaration that their minds are free, even if their Spatial Practice is restricted.

The Corruption of Sacred Space: The vignette featuring the Orthodox priest (played by *Leonid Alexeenko*) railing against the pollution of the Holy Land is a direct commentary on the spiritual and physical defilement of the land by global economic forces. The priest's emotional dialogue creates extreme cognitive dissonance, contrasting the spiritual memory "That's where Jesus is said to have walked on water" with the profaned, commercialized reality "Now it's a gastronomic sewer filled with excrement, the shit of American and German tourists who eat Chinese food". This scene powerfully uses the palimpsest metaphor. The original, sacred script of the holy site is brutally overwritten by a new, vulgar, and transient layer of global commerce and its waste products. The priest defends the 'Representational Space' from the corrupting 'Spatial Practice', showing that the physical vulnerability of space extends even to the "sacred" domain. Yet beyond its environmental and spiritual critique, the scene performs an act of resistance by restoring visibility to the Christian Palestinian community, a population increasingly marginalized within the dominant discourse of occupation. By foregrounding this forgotten voice, *Suleiman* reasserts a plural Palestinian identity that extends the struggle beyond a single faith or symbol, revealing a broader human loss embedded in the colonial condition (fig. 4).

Figure 4. Still from Chronicle of a Disappearance (Sijill Ikhtifā', dir. Elia Suleiman, 1996), at 31:26. The priest's monologue, subtitled "Now my world is small," laments the defilement of the Holy Land and the erasure of Christian Palestinian presence

THE ARCHITECTURE OF SELF AND SURVEILLANCE

Suleiman's depiction of his own fragmented presence, often silent, always observing, is used to expose the intimate political architecture of occupation and its psychological toll. The spatial elements of his domestic life and his professional pursuits become critical sites for analyzing the limits of Palestinian sovereignty and expression.

63

The search for a new dwelling in Jerusalem exposes the direct conflict between ethnic identity and the basic right to 'Spatial Practice'. The scene featuring a Palestinian woman seeking an apartment despite speaking Hebrew well, only to be denied because her identity is revealed by her Arabic name, '*Aden*,' illustrates the architectural consequence of linguistic and cultural erasure. The housing market, an ostensibly neutral economic zone, becomes a site of colonial segregation, transforming the 'Representations of Space' into a denial of Lived Space. The highly competent linguistic performance is rendered irrelevant by the unyielding, foundational power of ethnic identification, establishing that the architecture of ownership is fundamentally exclusionary (fig. 5).

Figure 5. Still from Chronicle of a Disappearance (Sijill Ikhtifā', dir. Elia Suleiman, 1996), at 00:45:47. Aden speaks on the phone about the house rent

The spatial politics of occupation is acutely rendered when a police patrol, after peeing on a wall (a Spatial Practice of casual domination), accidentally drops a walkie-talkie. This act of profound negligence, dropping the tool of surveillance during a moment of base, human necessity, is a critical cinematic irony. The walkie-talkie becomes a 'ghost object' that travels without logic, bridging people who can never truly meet. *Elia* discovers the device, which becomes his unexpected link to the voice of the oppressor, turning him into a silent monitor of the state's operations. The military order, typically abstract, suddenly manifests as a physical, faulty object. The narrative choice to transfer the walkie-talkie to the Palestinian woman '*Aden*,' who was denied housing, is highly symbolic: his means of communication now belongs to another voice of Palestine, perhaps the next generation, or the "other side" of his silence. She actively uses it to disrupt police operations, singing an "overly malevolent version of Israel's national anthem" over the air, turning surveillance technology into an act of guerrilla theater and political disruption [22]. Critically, because the film never shows the exchange, it refuses closure or continuity, keeping Palestinian life suspended, fragmented, and unresolved.

THE EPILOGUE OF ABSENCE: THE RETURN TO NAZARETH

The film's structural split, moving from the light, domestic '*Nazareth Personal Diary*' to the more ideological '*Jerusalem Political Diary*,' culminates not in political resolution, but in a final, ironic return to the quiet domesticity of his parents' home, sealing the meaning of his chronicle.

The Final Layer: *Ard al-Mi'ad,* The Promise Land and the Politics of Disappearance: The Conceived Home by Force. The film does not end in Jerusalem but cuts back to the domestic frame in *Nazareth*. The final scene shows *Elia*'s mother and father asleep, with all the lights off. The television remains on, displaying a large Israeli flag followed by a Hebrew narration celebrating the Feast of the Tabernacles (Sukkot)[23]. This image is the final, profound assertion of conceived space imposed by force: the nationalistic and religious spectacle of the dominant power invades the private, vulnerable Palestinian home, the last architectural refuge, while the family sleeps in darkness. The visual message is that surveillance is no longer external but internal; the struggle for space is complete when the ideological architecture of the state is projected onto the living room wall. The film's chronicle thus ends not with the political climax but with a quiet resignation to this internal invasion, offering a haunting statement on statelessness (fig. 6).

Figure 6. Still from Chronicle of a Disappearance (Sijill Ikhtifā', dir. Elia Suleiman, 1996), at 1:23:15. The Israeli flag on the television within a domestic setting reflects the silent infiltration of ideology into everyday space

The Last Homeland. The film ends with the dedication, "To my mother and father… the last countryland!!" This frames the domestic sphere (the parents' home) not just as comfort, but as the final, vulnerable, enduring homeland that survives the political and physical disintegration mapped by the chronicle. The silent, stable presence of his parents is the ultimate counter-archive, the quiet, persistent core of 'Representational Space' resisting the surrounding erasure.

65

THE LONG TAKE AS POLITICAL TERRITORY AND ARCHITECTURAL ENDURANCE

Suleiman consistently employs the long take, transforming seemingly mundane scenes into powerful architectural statements of presence and endurance. A key example is the recurring long take of *Nazareth* balconies (e.g., approx. 00:15:00 in the "*Nazareth Diary*"). This shot is characterized by a static, unedited camera framed through the same window. *Suleiman* also uses silence as a powerful political territory, noting that it can be so destabilizing to power structures. By abstaining from didactic excess, the shot allows the spectator to fill in the space. The unchanging frame becomes the most stable architectural boundary, protecting the domestic routine, the continuity of Palestinian life, from the political turbulence outside, emphasizing endurance through stillness.

THE SECOND CINEMATIC LAYER: SALT OF THIS SEA (2008). THE DIASPORA'S AFFECTIVE MAPPING OF RETURN

Annemarie Jacir's feature debut focuses on *Soraya*, a Brooklyn-born Palestinian, who travels to her family's homeland. Her journey is a physical act of traversing the boundary between the diaspora's abstract, inherited memory of the *Nakba* and the harsh reality of occupation. *Soraya* arrives as a *voyageur* forced to map her ancestral place through corporeal vulnerability. This is immediately evident in the border crossing sequence. Upon arrival, *Soraya* is immediately dehumanized by customs agents; she is subjected to intrusive searches when they realize she is Palestinian seeking entry to the *West Bank*. The border checkpoint is rendered as a site of intense affective trauma, where the political structure of control is brutally inscribed upon the individual body, and this is also manifested in other frames of the movie (fig. 7). This sequence establishes that the denial of space begins at the level of the body itself.

Figure 7. Still from Salt of This Sea (Milh Hadha al-Bahr, dir. Annemarie Jacir, 2008), at 00:27:30

ARCHITECTURAL AND FINANCIAL ERASURE: THE JAFFA BANK

The film delves into the economic dimension of spatial erasure. *Soraya* travels to *Jaffa* to retrieve her grandfather's savings, which were frozen in a bank account since his exile in 1948. This financial erasure serves as a barrier of forced absence; *Soraya* is repeatedly told that she has never been there as a Palestinian with a legal claim to her family's past assets. *Jaffa* itself is a profound site of absence, an ancient Palestinian city whose architecture might still be there, but demographics were largely erased during the *Nakba*. The experience of *Soraya* in *Jaffa* aligns with Calvino's concept of semiotic absence, where the "present" city is overwhelmed by what is lost: "Calvino's city stands as a metaphor for precisely this kind of semiotic absence, the present city pointing towards that which is 'not there' although the city is undeniably 'not that', it is undeniably not the absent thing toward which it perpetually points".

The '*Jaffa*' *Soraya* visits is simultaneously there physically and institutionally, and yet fundamentally 'not that', it is not the *Jaffa* of her grandfather's memory and entitlement. The bank scene uses sterile, institutional architecture to symbolize systemic control. The 'frozen account' symbolizes the freezing of historical time and the prevention of economic capital necessary for rebuilding. The colonial fortress of the bank utilizes bureaucracy to maintain the erasure of Palestinian economic presence, making the present *Jaffa* perpetually absent to *Soraya*.

VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE BARRIERS AS GEOGRAPHIES OF DENIAL

The protagonist's journey is defined by a dense layering of both visible (physical) and invisible (bureaucratic/ethnic) barriers, demonstrating the omnipresence of 'Representations of Space' in controlling Palestinian Spatial Practice. The frustration is twofold: *Soraya*'s desire to settle in Palestine is restricted by Israel, while her co-protagonist, *Emad*, finds his desire to leave Palestine similarly thwarted by visa denials. The denial of movement extends beyond the present moment. The film briefly cuts to a commemorative plaque inscribed 'Palestine 1924' (approx. 00:57:06). This moment is crucial, as the inscription itself embodies a palimpsestic effect, a layered reminder that it was Palestine. By flashing back to the year 1924, the film asserts that the present bureaucratic denial (the bank, the visa office) is not an anomaly but the contemporary consequence of systematic historical violence, linking the contemporary trauma directly to the colonial precedents of the Mandate era. The journey across occupied territory is mapped by constant friction. *Emad* and *Soraya* encounter physical checkpoints, visible barriers of steel bars, concrete walls in streets, and barbed wires, which are manifestations of the state's 'Representations of Space'. Dialogue, such as '*entazer hona 7agez amamak*' (or "wait here, a checkpoint is ahead"), underscores the fact that movement in the heritage cities is not fluid but occurs in fragmented, controlled segments, where the car, a symbol of transient freedom, is constantly subject to the military's will, reinforcing the difficulties of reclaiming space through vehicular motion.

THE RECLAMATION OF MEMORY

The climax of their unauthorized journey into Israel is the visit to *Soraya*'s ancestral house in *Jaffa*, a key site of memory and identity. The house is physically present but politically ruined (approx. 1:08:00). *Soraya* and *Emad* risk arrest to visit the property, which is now occupied by a liberal Israeli woman, *Irit*. *Soraya* insists they drop the pretense of polite behavior and demands recognition of her family's claim, illustrating the political impossibility of coexistence without recognition. The cinematic gaze lingers on architectural details, colorful tiles and doorframes, using these remnants to assert the history of Palestinian lived experiences ('Representational Space') against the current occupancy. The house, though physically standing, is perceived as completely ruined by *Soraya* because it has been stripped of its ancestral function and memory; it has become the absent thing toward which it perpetually points. This moment of confrontation, which involves *Soraya* asserting her lived memory over the occupier's passive opposition to the terrible situation of violence, is the film's attempt at reclaiming the architectural function of the home: a site of belonging (fig. 1). This impulse extends to the idea that ruins could go back if the real people used it, a philosophy embodied in their dangerous, illegal journey to places like ' *Duwaima'*, where the literal occupation of the land (even temporarily) is the only true act of Spatial Practice left. The sheer symbolic weight of *Soraya*'s visit remains crucial to the presentation and preservation of this contested site of memory, irrespective of the property's legal status.

THE THIRD CINEMATIC LAYER: FIVE BROKEN CAMERAS (2011)

The third layer is a bit different and will be briefly addressed, as it is a documentary, so it is another kind of cinematic space. *Five Broken Cameras* offers a deeply personal, first-hand account of life and nonviolent resistance in *'Bil'in'*, a *West Bank* village targeted by the construction of the Israeli Separation Barrier. The Wall is the physical manifestation of the colonial state's 'Representations of Space', a planned, monolithic structure designed to consume cultivated village land and support expanding settlements such as ' *Modi'in Illit'*. This architecture functions as a vast, decentralized Panopticon, echoing *Jeremy Bentham*'s design as described by *Michel Foucault*. The intentional vulnerability imposed by the architectural structure ensures that residents feel constantly visible, modifying their behavior under surveillance. The sheer materiality of the concrete, which contemporary Palestinian artists have used critically as a material of resistance, is here inverted by the state, which uses it to impose immobility, separation, and control over Spatial Practice'.

The resulting architectural fragmentation of *Bil'in* is mirrored in Calvino's description of *Armilla*:

> Whether Armilla is like this because it is unfinished or because it has been demolished, whether the cause is some enchantment or only a whim, I do not know. The fact remains that it has no walls, no ceilings, no floors: it has nothing that makes it seem a city, except the water pipes that rise vertically where the houses should be and spread out horizontally where the floors should be: a forest of pipes that end in taps, showers, spouts overflows[24].

Like *Armilla*, the village of *Bil'in* is rendered structurally incomplete, lacking the fundamental architectural stability ("walls, no ceilings, no floors") due to constant threats of demolition and land appropriation by the expansion of the neighboring settlement. The community must continue its existence amidst a fragmented, contested landscape. The film is structurally organized around the lifespan of five cameras, each damaged or destroyed by soldiers or settlers during the resistance. This object, operated by Palestinian farmer *Emad Burnat*, is not a detached observer; it is the ultimate, fragile architectural vessel of *Bil'in*'s 'Representational Space'.

Burnat's cinematography utilizes the immediacy of this hand-held camera to capture the dynamic Spatial Practice of resistance during the weekly protests. The co-direction by Israeli filmmaker *Guy Davidi* further manifests Said's contrapuntal method, providing a double perspective on the conflict. Furthermore, the narrative thread tracking the growth of *Burnat*'s son, *Gibreel*, in the shadow of the Wall functions as a critical emotional cartography. It links the monumental geopolitical conflict to the innocent, intimate space of childhood development, mapping the trauma of conflict onto the emotional landscape of the next generation.

NARRATIVE ENDURANCE AND THE POSSIBILITY OF RE-VISION. SYNTHESIS: CINEMA AS ARCHITECT AND CARTOGRAPHER

The analysis of *Chronicle of a Disappearance*, *Salt of This Sea*, and the brief analysis and overview of *Five Broken Cameras* demonstrates that Palestinian cinema fundamentally shifts the operative definition of architecture in a heritage city. In this context, where building is often forbidden and denial is systematic, architectural work moves from material construction to the resilient construction of visual memory and defiance.

These films utilize the camera frame as a precise, architectural tool for resistance. *Suleiman* constructs silent, enduring frames of domesticity; *Jacir* maps the affective trajectory of return through bodies, barriers, and institutions; and *Burnat* and *Davidi* construct a physically scarred, yet ultimately indestructible, visual record of resistance against monumental structures of control through the eye of an 'object'. Indeed, three objects guided this study: the walkie-talkie, the barrier, and the camera, each more liberated and enduring than the people who once held them. Objects, even when fractured, remain as witnesses; people, under the weight of exile, are often forced to vanish. Yet the heritage city lives, and lives in layers, its memory sedimented through these and other films; its presence continues to rebuild in the overlapping frames of remembrance and return.

Suleiman's *Chronicle of a Disappearance* utilized Said's double vision by contrasting the romantic idea of return with bureaucratic reality, applying the long take to define Lefebvre's 'Representational Space' (silence as political territory), and echoing Calvino's *Aglaura,* the city existing only in discourse, to map interior unrest onto domestic sites such as the *Nazareth* balconies. *Jacir*'s *Salt of This Sea* engaged dissonance by juxtaposing inherited *Nakba* memory with contemporary denial, converting the act of physical transgression into a revolutionary Spatial Practice against state law. This film thus manifests the semi-absent city that perpetually points toward "that which is 'not there'," mapping border crossing trauma and displacement onto the body of the

protagonist, *Soraya*. Finally, *Burnat* and *Davidi*'s *Five Broken Cameras* demonstrated Said's duality through co-direction, confronting the monolithic 'Representations of Space' (the Wall) with the Lived Space of protest, paralleling Calvino's *Armilla,* where the city is fragmented and unbuilt, thereby linking the trauma of conflict to the emotional landscape of childhood through *Gibreel*'s growth.

In *Chronicle of a Disappearance*, the recurring long take on domestic architecture functions as a visual assertion of silence and endurance within 'Representational Space'. In contrast, *Salt of This Sea* employs static mid-shots and a sterile, bureaucratic interior during the Jaffa Bank negotiation, thematically linking the institutional architecture to the denial of the financial archive, thereby cementing economic erasure as spatial dispossession. The final layer, *Five Broken Cameras*, deployed wide shots and the hand-held camera during the weekly protest confrontations to capture the visual battle between the massive, conceived geometry of the Separation Barrier and human Spatial Practice. Furthermore, the physical destruction of the camera itself is translated through quick, fragmented cuts and a sudden shift to black, functioning metaphorically as the physical violation of the counter-archive, the camera as a martyr to truth, echoing Kracauer's theory of shock and fragmentation.

THE ENDURING CONTRAPUNTAL PALIMPSEST

The practice of cinematic urbanism, utilizing the contrapuntal palimpsest, ensures that ruins and fragments are denied the status of endings. Instead, they are perpetually reassembled through the rhythm, cut, and gaze of the filmmaker. This mechanism transforms the act of viewing into an active political engagement.

What emerges from this cinematic effort is not a restoration of the city but a radical reimaging of it, one where the multiple narratives, memories, and absences remain suspended, discordant, and alive. By creating this resilient, fragment-based cinematic urbanism, these filmmakers ensure that while reconstruction may often be forbidden, and even the name "Palestine" must be defended, narration endures. And through that enduring narration, the city is not only remembered, but perpetually rebuilt in vision.

> The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls[25].

As Calvino reminds us through *Zaira* in his *Invisible Cities*, Palestinian cinema becomes the hand that traces the invisible lines of the heritage city, not to reconstruct what was lost, but to let this city speak again through its silences, absences, and remembered gestures.

NOTES

[1] Khalidi, Walid. 2008. "The Arab Perspective." In *The Israel–Arab Reader: A Documentary History of the Middle East Conflict, 7th ed.*, edited by Walter Laqueur and Barry Rubin, 35-42. New York: Penguin. [2] Migdal, Joel S. 1980. "The Question of Palestine, by Edward W. Said." *Political Science Quarterly* 95, no. 4: 726-727, https://doi.org/10.2307/2150647. [3] Examples include Lydda (al-Lydd), Jaffa, Imwas, and Yalu, cities and villages that were renamed, demolished, or removed from contemporary state cartographies following 1948. See also Khalidi, Rashid. 2010 updated ed. *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness.* New York: Columbia University Press, 231-254. [4] Makdisi, Saree. 2008. *Palestine Inside Out: An Everyday Occupation.* New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 83-101. [5] Said, Edward W., and Liz Gill. 1994. *Representations of the Intellectual.* New York: Vintage. https://openlibrary.org/books/OL1080460M/Representations_of_the_intellectual. 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"The Palimpsest as a Metaphor for Cultural Landscapes." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 87, no. 4: 662. [19] The post-Oslo period (following the Oslo Accords signed in 1993) is characterized by increased geopolitical fragmentation and an ambiguous political future for Palestinians, a phase described as one of intensified fragmentation, enclosure, and everyday negotiation under occupation. See, for instance, Makdisi, Saree. 2008. Op. cit. and Khalidi, Rashid. 2010 updated ed. Op. cit., 231-254. [20] "La città che dicono ha molto di quel che ci vuole per esistere, mentre la città che esiste al suo posto, esiste meno [...] E anche a me che vorrei tener distinte nella memoria le due città, non resta che parlarti dell'una, perché il ricordo dell'altra, mancando di parole per fissarlo, s'è disperso." Excerpt from Calvino, Italo. 1972. "Le città e il nome. 1. Aglaura." In *Le città invisibili.* Torino: Einaudi, 36-37. English translation by William Weaver in *Invisible Cities.* [21] Suleiman, Elia. 2019. "On Silence: Silence Itself Actually Has a Site that is so Undefined." Interview quoted in *Journal of Palestine Studies* 48, no. 4. [22] Guerrilla theater is a form of political protest that presents unannounced, politically or socially motivated performances in public spaces for an unsuspecting audience. [23] The Feast of the Tabernacles (Sukkot) is a Jewish festival coinciding with the harvest. The temporary dwellings (tabernacles or tents) remind participants of the 40-year sojourn in the wilderness, symbolizing God's provision. [24] "Se Armilla sia così perché incompiuta o perché demolita, se ci sia dietro un incantesimo o solo un capriccio, io lo ignoro. Fatto sta che non ha muri, né soffitti, né pavimenti: non ha nulla che la faccia sembrare una città, eccetto le tubature dell'acqua, che salgono verticali dove dovrebbero esserci le case e si diramano dove dovrebbero esserci i piani: una foresta di tubi che finiscono in rubinetti, docce, sifoni, troppopieni." Excerpt from Calvino, Italo. 1972. "Le città sottili. 3. Armilla." In *Le città invisibili.* Torino: Einaudi, 22-23. English translation in *Invisible Cities.* [25] "Ma la città non dice il suo passato, lo contiene come le linee d'una mano, scritto negli spigoli delle vie, nelle griglie delle finestre, negli scorrimano delle scale, nelle antenne dei parafulmini, nelle aste delle bandiere, ogni segmento rigato a sua volta di graffi, seghettature, intagli, svirgole." Excerpt from Calvino, Italo. 1972. "Le città e la memoria. 3. Zaira." In *Le città invisibili.* Torino: Einaudi, 10-11. English translation in *Invisible Cities.*

BEYOND BEITOU *LIBRARY ARCHITECTURE AND CIVIC RESILIENCE IN TAIWAN*

By Heather Clydesdale (Santa Clara University)

ABSTRACT

Over the last thirty years, Taiwan has cultivated a vibrant architectural scene. One exemplary project, the Beitou Branch of the Taipei Library designed by Bioarchitecture Formosana, broke new ground in sustainable construction and fashioned aesthetics that connected people to the local topography and historical legacies. Yet the building's achievement extends beyond launching a design trend. The real feat was in forging a paradigm that can strengthen social trust and galvanize civic values.

This article examines the Beitou paradigm, along with other projects that interpret it within different contexts across Taiwan, to demonstrate the potency of architecture that is positioned strategically in environmental, historical, social, and civic landscapes. It considers these projects as manifestations of Kenneth Frampton's Critical Regionalism and, through the lens of political theories shaped by Alexandre Lefebvre and John Rawls, among others, suggests how architecture can constitute a "colloquial expression of liberal democracy." It concludes that Taiwanese library architecture promulgates "common sense" among visitors, which in turn strengthens civic values. Connecting this to findings in neuroarthistory and neuroscience shows that architecture can be surprisingly active in determining how people discern and evaluate information, and in shaping feelings, decisions, or actions that ensue. Buildings can play a crucial role as concrete mediators of a shared reality to help individual citizens and the social body cope with misinformation. This is especially germane to the government and citizenry of Taiwan as they face the specter of conflict with the People's Republic of China (PRC), which considers Taiwan to be a renegade province, and is targeting Taiwan with a sustained campaign of cognitive warfare. More generally, the Beitou paradigm indicates how public architecture can strengthen social cohesion and bolster civic resilience in democratic societies.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last thirty years, Taiwan, an island off of China's east coast, has established a thriving liberal and pluralistic society and built an advanced economy, the crown-jewel of which is its semiconductor industry. In that same period, the government has invested in local infrastructure and community projects, cultivating a vibrant architectural scene. One exemplary project is the Beitou Branch of the Taipei Library (*Taibeishi Beitou li tushuguan fenguan* 台北市立圖書館北投分館). This library broke new ground in sustainable construction and operations. Additionally, its aesthetics rooted

the structure in the local topography and historical legacies while fostering individual exploration and community connections. Yet the building's achievement extends beyond launching a design trend. The real feat was in forging a paradigm that strengthens social trust and galvanizes civic values. This is especially germane to the government and people of Taiwan as they face the specter of conflict with the People's Republic of China (PRC), which considers Taiwan to be a renegade province. In addition to amassing forces for a possible invasion, the PRC is targeting Taiwan with a sustained campaign of cognitive warfare, which leverages neuroscience to assail the mindset and undermine the will of a population[1]. This article argues that the Beitou library formed a new paradigm, and that libraries built subsequently in Taiwan demonstrate its potency. These libraries show how architecture can act as a sieve to filter and mediate individual's cognitive experiences while negotiating and promulgating civic values among the local population. Findings in neuroarthistory and discoveries in neuroscience show that architecture can be surprisingly active in determining how people discern and evaluate information, and in shaping feelings, decisions, or actions that ensue. This can help individual citizens and the social body cope with misinformation and even withstand cognitive warfare attacks. The Beitou paradigm shows how public architecture can play a crucial role in democracies and liberal societies.

BEITOU SETS A NEW STANDARD

With the opening of the Beitou library in 2006, the firm Bioarchitecture Formosana (BaF; *Jiu dian* 九典) introduced new principles for library architecture in Taiwan. They designed a wedge-like structure that responds intuitively to the flow of the creek splicing through the surrounding park (fig. 1). The library is built of cedar and hokulite (*Beitou shi* 北投石), a stone cast in the sulfur waterfalls and streams that run through Beitou and nearby Yangmingshan 阳明山 National Park. In form and material, the library seems to have been cast by natural forces (fig. 2).

Figure 1. Bioarchitecture Formosana, Beitou Branch Library, exterior, 2006 (photograph by the author, 2025)

Figure 2. Bioarchitecture Formosana, Beitou Branch Library, exterior, 2006 (photograph by the author, 2025)

Aesthetically, the library translates the vocabulary of Japanese tea architecture into a contemporary vernacular. On the exterior, grid patterns around windows and tightly-stacked horizontal balustrades interrupted by vertical posts evoke patterns that were popular in Taiwan during the Japanese colonial era (1895-1945)[2]. Meanwhile, the hodgepodge lean-to slope of the roof and unpainted wood summon the rustic aesthetic of a Japanese tea house without reducing it to a trope. Inside, sight-lines run under exposed timber beams on the ceiling and over shoulder-height bookshelves to reach views of lush trees in the park. The use of natural wood in a design that dissolves the boundary between interior and exterior welds the structure to Beitou's history under Japanese rule.

Imperial Japan (1868-1947) seized Taiwan after defeating China in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-95). One of the occupiers' inaugural enterprises was to develop the hot springs at Beitou just north of Taipei 台北. Today the new library stands between two colonial-era structures and forms a visual bridge between them. One is the old train station, ironically named New-Beitou station (*Xin Beitou zhan* 新北投站, 1916) made of honey-colored wood in a style that was typical of stations throughout Taiwan at the turn of the century (fig. 3)[3]. The other is the public bathhouse (now a museum), an elegant medley of European and Japanese typologies and materials, including white plaster, red brick, grey stone, and unfinished wood, that were favored by Japanese architects of the era[4]. In referencing these, the Beitou library expresses a nostalgic sentiment that is less a longing for bygone days than an aesthetic declaration that Taiwan's history is not interchangeable with China's[5].

Figure 3. New-Beitou train station, exterior, Japanese colonial era, 1916 (photograph by the author, 2025)

Even as the Beitou library grapples with the past, it steps into the future as the first certified green library in Taiwan. Situated near public transportation routes, fitted with solar panels, and shaded by lush foliage irrigated with recycled rainwater, the project fuses sustainable approaches with social goals of promoting the productivity and happiness of visitors[6]. Advancing environmental and human well-being through architecture is central to BaF's philosophy, which advances green design that appeals to common sense and common knowledge while provoking surprise and joy[7].

The Beitou library gives physical form to Kenneth Frampton's ideas of Critical Regionalism, whereby architecture catalyzes an ongoing dynamic between designer and user to "cultivate a resistant, identity-giving culture"[8]. The visitor's tactile and multi-sensory experiences magnifies this phenomenon[9]. At Beitou, the materials (soft smooth wood alongside pitted and parched hokulite) and surroundings (rushing waters in the stream, rain water on leaves, and the play of light and air) kindle these experiences. It becomes a community base from which the visitor can embark on intellectual explorations and to which they can return.

TAINAN MUNICIPAL LIBRARY

The philosophy that undergirds the Beitou library coalesced into a paradigm that guided subsequent library projects across Taiwan's varied terrain and sub-cultures. Comparing the Beitou building with the 2021 Tainan Municipal Library (*Tainanshi li tushuguan* 台南市里图书馆) shows one way in which the principles of the former were adapted and applied in the latter.

Tainan is on the southwest coast and for centuries was Taiwan's center of politics, culture, and commerce. Founded by the Dutch, then ruled as part of the Tungning 东宁 Kingdom in the 17th century, Tainan received successive

waves of ethnic Han Chinese immigrants from south China. While in northern Taiwan, Modern Standard Chinese is the lingua franca (a legacy of the Nationalists who fled to Taiwan when the Communists won the Chinese Civil War in 1949), Taiwanese, a dialect of Hokkien (*Fujian hua* 福建话) enjoys preeminence in the south as does the Hokkien "Minnan" 闽南 architectural style, epitomized by colorful temples nestled in circuitous alleyways. The 2021 Tainan library designed by Mecanoo and Mayu Architects (*Zhang Malong Chen Yulin lianhe jianzhu shiwusuo* 张玛龙陈玉霖联合建筑师事务所) is a thirty-minute bus ride east of the city center. This building cleaves to the impetus behind the Beitou library but translates it for Tainan culture.

The library rises above a flat plot surrounded by sterile apartment blocks. In this setting, the library acts as both landmark and landscape. The structure is monumental, assuming the form of a metal-laced coffer floating on slender white columns (fig. 4). Like an upside-down ziggurat with deep eaves, the coffer expands in all directions and protects visitors from the wind and rain. Patterns derived from antique maps, emblematic of old Tainan, ornament the surface of louvers over the windows[10]. Upon entering, a multi-storied atrium lined with wood soars above the lobby, giving it a grandiose and uplifting feeling (fig. 5). Opposite the entrance is a dramatic red lacquer staircase (fig. 6), which calls to mind historic structures like the Temple of the Martial God (*Sidian wumiao* 祀典武庙). During the Japanese colonial era, the Minnan style was relegated to personal architecture, so this gesture constitutes a retort to the Japanese-style inflections seen at Beitou[11]. The gold and red surfaces impart a classical ambiance, infusing the library with a sacred feel, as though it were a temple[12]. The avant-garde forms and modern-day activities and resources, however, lean into the future. Together these elements reference the past while professing that the future has yet to be written.

Figure 4. Mecanoo and Mayu Architects, Tainan Municipal Library, exterior, 2021 (photograph by author, 2023)
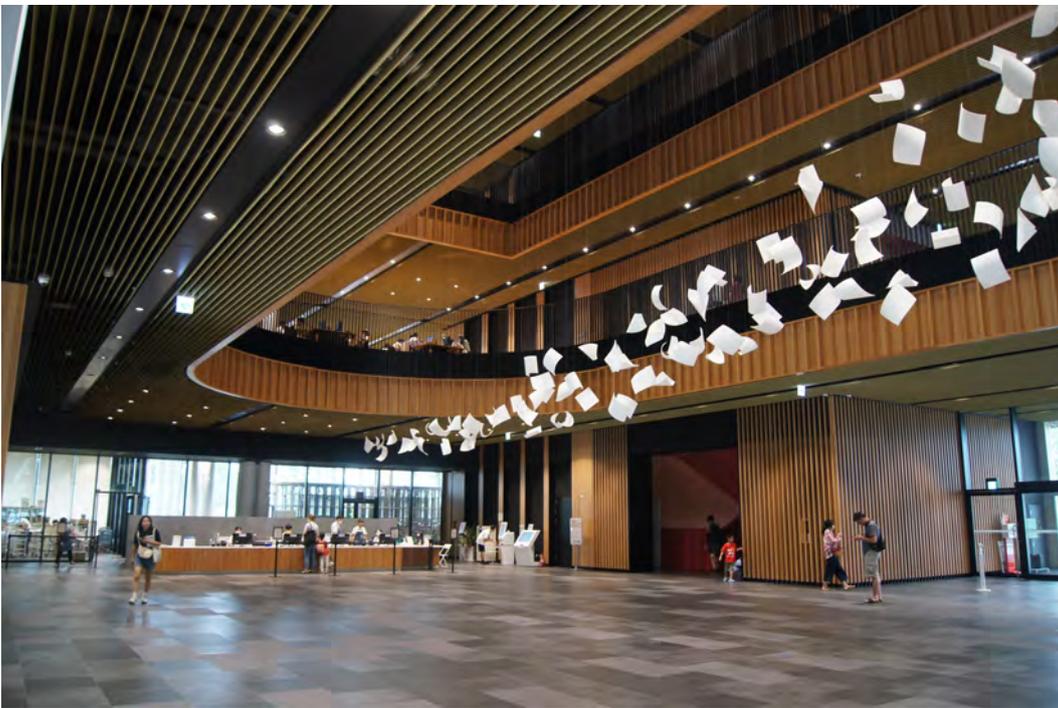
Figure 5. Mecanoo and Mayu Architects, Tainan Municipal Library, 2021, lobby with artwork Gust of Wind (2020) by Paul Cocksedge (photograph by author, 2023)
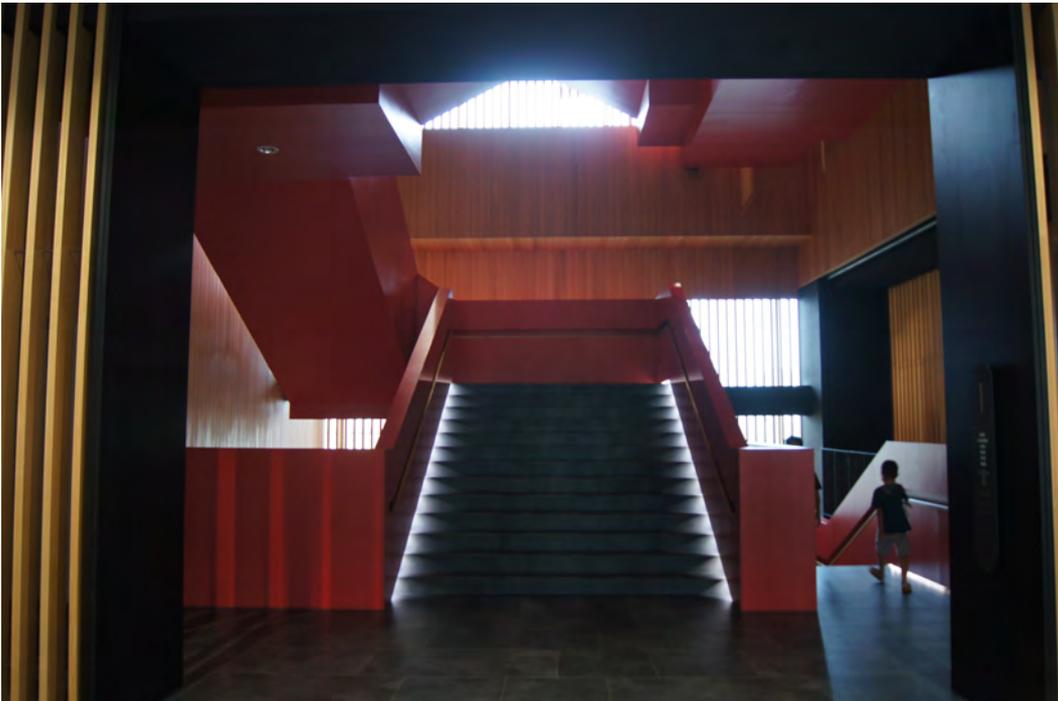
Figure 6. Mecanoo and Mayu Architects, Tainan Municipal Library, staircase, 2021 (photograph by author, 2023)

Climbing the stairs and exploring the upper floors, separate areas beckon with multiple options for consuming media. Some have study carrells, others comfy chairs for lounging or small couches with a big-screen TV for watching videos or gaming. There are multi-function rooms and exhibition spaces. In 2023, one featured the naming cultures of Taiwan's indigenous Austronesian peoples and the other memorialized cultural luminaries from Tainan. Outside, the

shaded plaza attracts families with children trying out roller blades and blowing bubbles. Several sunken courtyards cater to the idiosyncratic interests of patrons. One leads to a bustling café with a full menu, another to a cram-room with teens arced over glowing laptops aligned in rows on tables, and a third has a playground for young children. The main structure above ground and the cavernous plazas below imply that the city's layered past and its upheavals continue to reverberate[13], while the concentration or animated laughter and conversation of patrons testify to the value of living in the present.

Mayu principal architect Chen Yulin 陈玉霖 explained that he makes buildings that are intuitive to navigate [14]. The colossal building distinguishes itself from the surrounding phalanx of apartment buildings, and the generous overhang invites people to circle the building and explore the sunken courtyards. Art works, exhibits, and the cafe give the library a sense of delight and discovery. The showcasing of indigenous as well as Hokkien history underscores place and plurality, while the reading and multimedia areas invite patrons to pursue their own interests. Like the Beitou library, the Tainan library makes history palpable, but leaves it open to nuanced interpretation and debate. Further, it expands the Beitou model by adding niche areas for dedicated activities (such as the cram room) alongside inviting public spaces for all (the café, lobby, and exhibition spaces). This encourages people to simultaneously enjoy solitude, benefit from solidarity with peers, and appreciate harmony across the diverse community.

LIBRARIES FOR THE PEOPLE

Libraries in Taiwan were first built during the Japanese occupation. But by the end of World War II and with arrival of the Nationalists, the number of libraries had dwindled from 90 to thirteen[15]. The present spate of library construction gained momentum after the opening of the Beitou library. In the decade before that, the Taiwanese and local governments focused their attention on constructing hundreds of museums to fashion a multicultural identity after Taiwan's leaders lifted martial law in 1987[16]. Architects, responding to and shaping the enlightened moment, branched in new directions but with a common purpose to make architecture for the people[17].

Taiwan's shift from an emphasis on museums to libraries in the last ten years is interesting. A museum's purpose is to curate a narrative and attract a mix of residents and tourists, who pay an entrance fee and visit occasionally for leisure. Libraries are a portal to new worlds, but it is the visitor who braids facts, ideas, opinions, or fictions into a cohesive narrative. And, local libraries are built for the community. While specialized collections, such as the National Archives Administration (*Guojia dang'anguan* 国家档案馆) in Taipei and the National Library of Public Information (*Guoli gonggong zixun tushuguan* 国立公共资讯图书馆 in Taichung 台中 draw patrons from afar, the purpose of branch libraries is to serve the diverse constituents within a community. From young children flocking to story hour to elders whiling away the morning browsing newspapers, libraries are a nexus for journeys at all stages of people's lives. Like a train station, they are a fixture of the local and a point of departure to new destinations.

According to a 2024 report by the Ministry of Education, expanding local libraries entails a coordinated strategy involving municipal, county, and regional governments to serve rural and urban populations; indigenous, Chinese, and recent immigrants; and children, teens, adults, and elderly

people[18]. The report reiterates sentiments articulated a century earlier

by Y.C. James Yen (Yan Yangchu 晏阳初), who launched the Mass Education Mo
vement in rural China, which would later ecome influential in Taiwan. Yen urg
ed workers to "base their program upon the felt needs and vital
problems of the people"[19]. In past and present, the objective of libraries was
not prescriptive but was meant to fathom and fulfill the curiosity and interests
of the people.

Looking briefly at a few more examples of libraries in Taiwan will impart the
scope of ecological and aesthetic iterations based on the Beitou paradigm. The
Kaohsiung Public Library (*Gaoxiong shili tushuguan* 高雄市立图书馆), designed
by Ricky Liu and Associates (*Liu Peilin jianzhu ceshi shiwusuo* 刘培林建筑策师
事务所) and the firm of Toyo Ito (Japanese: *Itō Toyō kenchiku sekkei jimusho*
伊東豊雄建築設計事務所) turns the environmental connection inside-out and
upside-down by inserting a floating forest into the library. The library opened
in 2014 and is a multi-storied box elevated above a plaza and penetrated from
above by a circular atrium. On the outer facades, balconies with lush trees line
each story, forming a screen between the interior and the adjacent cityscape
and waterfront beyond (fig. 7). Inside, however, the most spectacular feature is
the atrium levitating above a spiral staircase. Climbing up the floors (which
progress through collections of popular and senior reading on the first floor to
science, religion, and philosophy on the seventh floor), one eventually draws
level with and finally surpasses the canopy of the trees in the atrium,
imparting a feeling of transcendence (fig. 8). This stunning library is part of a
network of sixty libraries in the Greater Kaoshiung area, supplemented by a
book link service, a mobile library, and a "smart library" in the public transit
system, all of which demonstrate the primacy of libraries as a way to engage
the public[20].

Figure 7. Ricky Liu and Associates with the firm of Toyo Ito, Kaohsiung Public Library, exterior, 2014 (photograph by author, 2025)
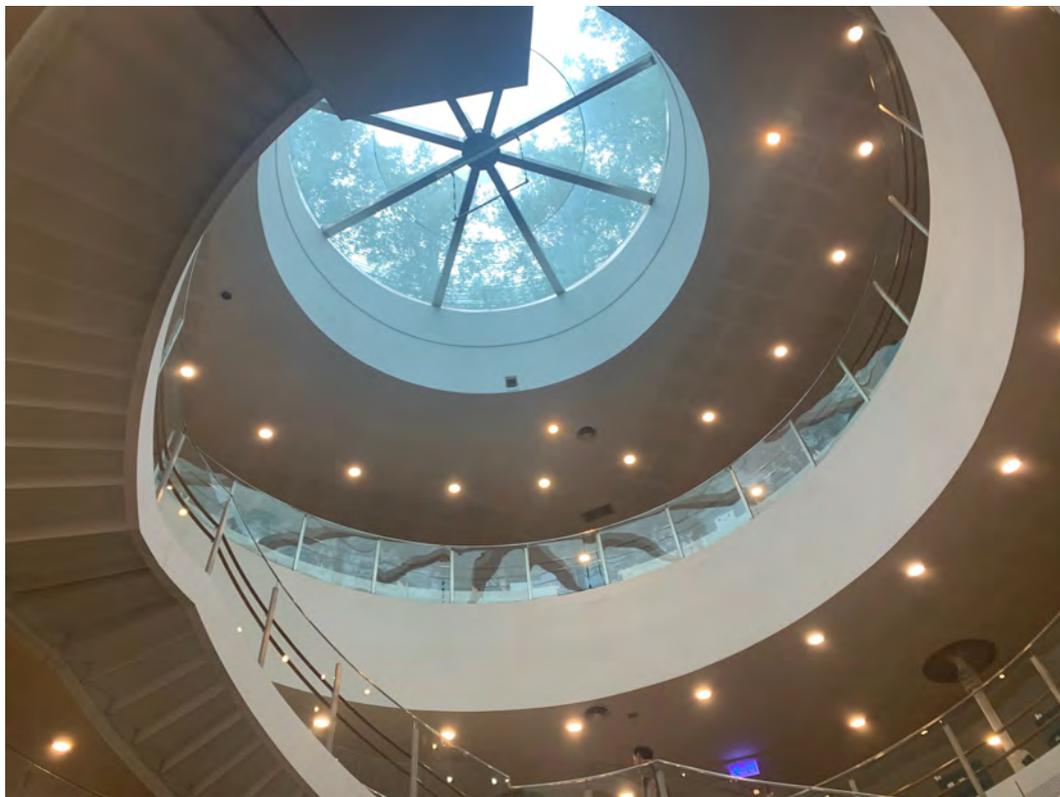
Figure 8. Ricky Liu and Associates with the firm of Toyo Ito, Kaohsiung Public Library, atrium, 2014 (photograph by author, 2025)

Local libraries on Taiwan's less-developed east coast feature equally innovative designs. The Taitung County Government Cultural Affairs Bureau Library (*Taidongxian zhengfu wenhuachu tushuguan* 台东县政府文化处图书管) has stalwart diagonal lines that bend at assertive angles to mirror the rugged peaks that jut skyward behind this coastal city. Interlocking geometric shapes and blocks of colors formed by different materials echo the Austronesian aesthetics that are prominent in Taitung (fig. 9). Built in 1984, the library has undergone upgrades and a targeted interior renovation in 2013[21]. Today, twelve years later, it is undergoing a full interior remodel, which includes converting an area with a public swimming pool into a large open for the library and attesting to the county's investment in public architecture[22].

Figure 9. Taitung County Government Cultural Affairs Bureau Library, exterior, 1984 (photograph by author, 2025)

Taitung is also home to what is the boldest iteration of the model set by the Beitou library, which is why I include it here even though it is a university facility. This is the National Taitung University Library and Information Center (*Guoli Taidong daxue tushu zixunguan* 国立台台东大学图书资讯管) by Chien Lian-Chuan 陈良泉 of Environmental Dimentional Studios International (*Taidong jingxiang lianhe jianzhu shiwusuo* 台东景象联合建筑师事务所). Built in 2014, the structure is pyramidal, but with a wedge cut out so that two planes stand upright and perpendicular to one another. One facade is made entirely of soil and grass with a zig-zag staircase embedded into the slope (fig. 10). A stone facade to the east are dotted with irregularly-placed windows that look out over a lake and, beyond, the coast and Pacific Ocean. A similar facade on the west side offers views of the peaks. The unusual design is energy-efficient and built to withstand typhoons that regularly pummel Taitung[23]. Outside, one can ascend the stairs to summit the library-mountain. From the peak, sweeping views of the sea to the east and mountains on the west unfurl. As a mountain, the library projects skyward even as it is buried under an earthen carapace. This dichotomy of elevation and submersion riffs on indigenous Taiwanese architecture, which was commonly raised above ground level or dug to be partially below ground. It positions the library within the local history and vertiginous topography of eastern Taiwan, where indigenous cultures more successfully resisted assimilation into Chinese culture[24].

Figure 10. Chien Lian-Chuan of Environmental Dimensional Studios International, National Taitung University Library and Information Center, 2014 (photograph by author, 2025)

These examples impart the scope and variety of the diffusion of the Beitou paradigm and show how architectural siting, form, design, and material can charge public architecture with meaning. Tangible and perceptible, structures can not only represent, but can invigorate social and civic values. They can also serve as a foil to and filter for the abstractions of language in print and, even more importantly, the messages transmitted by erratic pixels that fleet and flicker across screens.

ENTANGLED ENVIRONMENTS, HISTORIES, SOCIAL CONNECTIONS, AND CIVICS

The building of the Beitou library introduced a form of architecture that acts as a medium to entwine individual citizens with nature, history, culture, and the social body. Government officials and architects alike recognize the reciprocal relationships between these entities. Taiwan's Minister of Education Cheng Ying-yao 郑英耀 stresses local characteristics in library design because these resonate with the diverse demographics that the government hopes to engage [25]. And, at a forum on regionalism in 2017, architect Han Pao-De 汉宝德 found the concept of place to be commiserate with culture, saying, "Good regional architecture is related to history and collective memory"[26]. (*Yi ge hao di diyu jianzhu gen lishi yu jiti jiyi you guan* 一个好的地域建筑跟历史与集体记忆有关). Speaking at the same forum, architect Luo Shiwei 罗时玮 shared that architecture can change society. "The existence of architecture," he says, "is no longer merely for its own meaning, but rather to bring out the energy and imagination of the entire social transformation" [27]. (*Jianzhu di cunzai bu zai zhi shi weile jianzhu ziji benshen dib yiyi, er shi dai chu zheng ge shehui zhuanxing di nengliang yu xiangxiang*

建筑的存在不再只是为了建筑自己本身的意义,而是带出整个社会转型的能量与想像).

What instigates this transformation? Architecture has the ability to instill "common sense" in individuals, which can then be shared and perpetuated in the public realm.
Writing about common sense, Hannah Arendt stated that it

> occupies such a high rank in the hierarchy of political qualities because it is the one sense that fits into reality as a whole our five strictly individual sense and the strictly particular data they perceive. It is by virtue of common sense that the other sense perceptions are known to disclose reality and not merely felt as irritations on our nerves or resistance sensations on our bodies. A noticeable decrease in common sense in any given community and a noticeable increase in superstition and gullibility are therefore almost infallible signs of alienation from the world[28].

In the private realm, the library affirms the dignity of individuals by entrusting people to write narratives and draw conclusions. In its public aspect, architecture can generate civic confidence and give form to shared liberal values.

Alexandre Lefebvre identifies local engagement as a crucial to liberalism because it mitigates the stifling uniformity of modernity[29]. Leaning on the ideas of John Rawls, Lefebvre says a society's understanding of liberal values does not reside in formal learning but are intrinsic to institutions, history, and "colloquial expressions of liberal democracy"[30]. The key point made by Rawls is that democracy hinges on citizens with diverse viewpoints recognizing certain principles and having confidence that their fellow citizens likewise recognize them[31].

Where can one find these "colloquial expressions of liberal democracy"? Well, one place is in architecture. The Beitou library model is compelling because its values-like connection to place and history, respect for the environment, joy in the pursuit of knowledge, and stimulation of curiosity are shared but do not trespass on other beliefs people hold.

The power of architecture in democratic processes was by Winston Churchill, who, in his appeal to restore the House of Commons, said that it facilitated impromptu exchanges and disagreements that energize the beating heart of democracy. He prefaced his argument with the quotable maxim: "We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us"[32]. Moreover, in a library, architecture can merge with the institutional mission to become a nexus of what Jürgen Habermas calls "communicative action," wherein people transmit traditions and wisdom and engage in negotiation and cooperation[33].

The significance of the Beitou paradigm is in part made possible by a unique feature of Taiwan's democracy, which is the formal role of neighborhood wardens in governance. Seats are won through elections, and prospective or incumbent wardens are under pressure to deliver for their constituents (whom they often know personally) by cooperating with other elected officials

or party operatives or by pushing back on them[34]. Local residents wield considerable influence over construction projects via this micro-representation, which results in a symbiotic relationship between community values and public architecture[35].

LIBRARIES AS BASTIONS OF SOCIAL TRUST AND CIVIC RESILIENCE

Today, the proliferation and circulation of misinformation and conspiracy theories imperil democracies. In Taiwan, the menace is even more acute as China prepares to reclaim the island. In addition to withstanding military exercises off its shores and over its skies, the island is besieged by cognitive warfare campaigns. These entail sowing misinformation, spreading propaganda, amplifying divisive content, promoting favored narratives, or downplaying sensitive topics. The objective is to lacerate Taiwan's social fabric and fray the resolve of politicians and citizenry alike[36]. Counter measures, such as fact-checking and media literacy, struggle to keep pace with the onslaught of malicious content, which is increasingly fueled by artificial

intelligence[37]. This presents a fundamental dilemma: how can a liberal society effectively counter campaigns without compromising core values?[38] Cognitive warfare is pernicious because it leverages neuroscience to undermine mental states and manipulate behavior. It is especially effective when it capitalizes on latent anxieties that increase a target's susceptibility[39]. But herein lies an opportunity. People are more likely to ignore malevolent messaging if it contradicts what they already believe or know[40]. Triangulating from neuroarthistory and new research in neuroscience suggest that architecture can play a role in minimizing the impact of cognitive warfare.

Semir Zeki, a pioneer in the field of neuroarthistory, claims that art acts as an extension of the brain. In interpreting stimuli, the brain draws on essentialised knowledge, which is refined through sensory encounters with

stimuli[41]. Zeki extends these ideas to architecture[42]. Moving through buildings creates essentialised experiences, eventually informing affect. But, can this change the way a person reacts to new stimuli; say something they read in a blog post or watch on TikTok? Recent studies in neuroscience suggest that it can.

When confronted with stimuli, the brain employs a Bayesian approach. That is to say, it invents a neural representation of what it thinks the initial cause might be, then tests this hypothesis against the ongoing stream of stimuli. The representation is informed by prior experiences and determines how much attention one devotes to the situation, how one interprets it, and, ultimately, how one responds[43]. This is not to say that architecture and connections to the environment or strong social ties will fully inoculate an individual or population against misinformation and its ilk. It does mean, however, that because perception and action mutually sculpt one another[44], positive affect (such as trust) gained through embodied experiences in built environments can blunt one's susceptibility. Library buildings have even more potential in this regard because many people spend time in them as part of their routines. In repeated visits, the library molds values across diverse swathes of the population, providing boosters to the communal immune system. The beauty and interest inherent in the architecture motivates people to recognize and affirm the social bonds that cognitive warfare seeks to dissolve.

CONCLUSION

The Beitou library established a new paradigm, and other library projects across Taiwan show how it can be adapted to various localities to connect people to environments, histories, and one another. Creative inspiration by architects, coordination by the Ministry of Education and other government entities, along with community autonomy and citizen engagement, suggest that the Beitou model provides a way to serve the needs of individuals while activating civic values. Enjoining people through embodied and sensory experiences in environmental and historical contexts, these libraries manifest the ideas of Critical Regionalism as articulated by Kenneth Frampton. Through materials and aesthetics, they stimulate tactile experiences that build to common sense among people from various demographics, with unique interests, and at different stages of life. Architecture can initiate a dynamic between designer and users to promote civic interactions and understanding. This is evident in Taiwan's local libraries where individual and community agendas converge and converse in communicative action.

Ultimately, these inscribe common values in the public consciousness. Libraries in the Beitou model stand as concrete mediators, not just of reliable information, but of a shared reality. Neuroarthistory suggests that architecture can determine affect, and neuroscience indicates that this influences how information is appraised and acted upon, even in the face of atomized and clashing perceptions of reality that people navigate on screens. This underscores the capacity not just of libraries, but more generally of public architecture in democratic societies to revitalize liberal values and fortify civic resilience.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The text follows conventions of Pinyin Romanization except when alternative Romanizations are commonly used for the names of people and places.

NOTES

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ARCHITECTURE AND CONFLICT *REBUILDING IDENTITY, CONTINUITY, AND SPATIAL AGENCY IN POST-WAR MOSUL*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how architecture can contribute to rebuilding identity, continuity and spatial agency in contexts marked by protracted violence, focusing on the post-war reconstruction of the Old City of Mosul. The recent escalation of global armed conflicts and the growing inability of major international organisations to mediate or protect civilians have exposed the fragility of reconstruction frameworks, often limited to emergency responses that overlook cultural and socio-spatial dimensions. Within this landscape, the role of architects extends beyond technical repair, involving the safeguarding of material and immaterial identities and the reactivation of everyday life.

Through a theoretical lens that interprets reconstruction as cultural reinstatement and spatial justice, the article analyses the Ekhlas School project developed by ARCò – Architettura e Cooperazione within the UNESCO initiative Revive the Spirit of Mosul. The research adopts a multi-scalar methodology integrating urban analysis, participatory processes with local communities, and the reinterpretation of local architectural elements such as courtyards and Musciarabia. Environmental strategies, including passive cooling, ventilated façades, water-reuse systems and photovoltaic integration, are studied as contemporary adaptations of traditional climatic logics.

The case demonstrates how architecture can act simultaneously on technical, environmental, cultural and social registers, generating forms of continuity that resist erasure and rebuild trust in a deeply fractured urban context. Ultimately, the article argues that reconstruction, when rooted in context-specific knowledge and community engagement, becomes a form of spatial diplomacy capable of restoring agency and supporting long-term cultural and territorial resilience.

INTRODUCTION: FRAGILE GEOPOLITICS AND THE SPATIAL DIMENSIONS OF CONFLICT

The progressive deterioration of the global geopolitical landscape in recent decades has profoundly reshaped the conditions under which architecture is conceived, produced, and experienced. The system of norms, institutions, and multilateral mechanisms that emerged after the Second World War, intended to govern disputes, limit violence, and promote cooperation, appears increasingly fragile. Recent data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program shows that in 2024 the number of active armed conflicts involving state actors reached sixty-one (fig. 1), the highest figure since 1946[1].
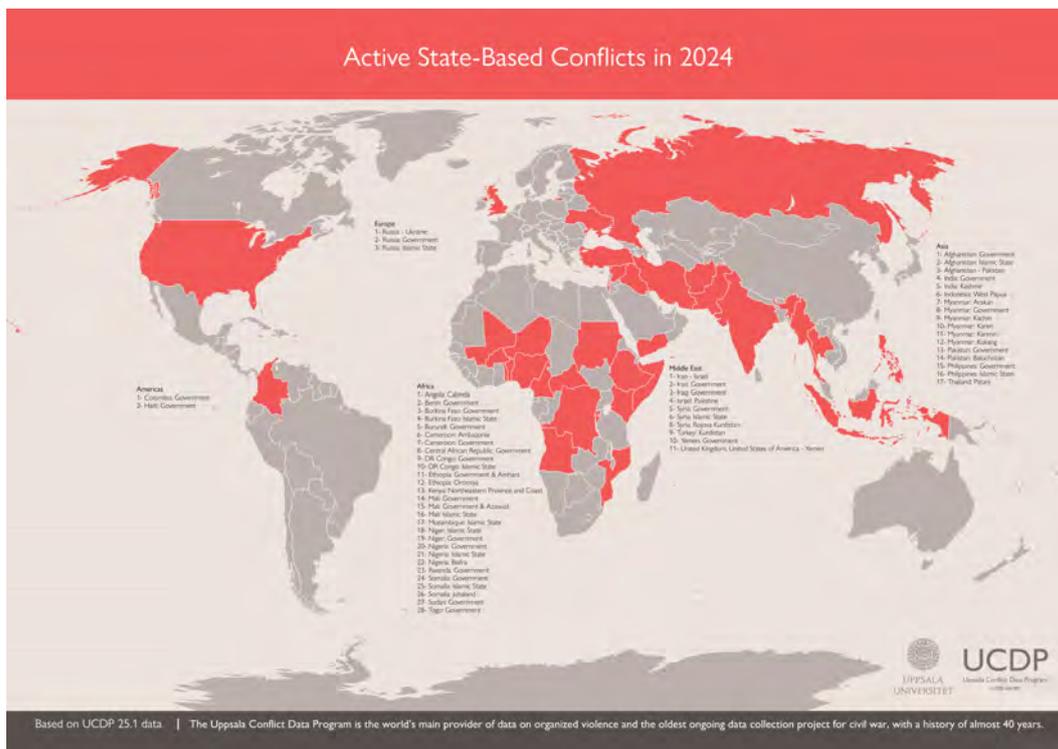

Figure 1. Active state-based conflicts in 2024. Davies, S., Pettersson, T., Sollenberg, M., & Öberg, M. (2025). Organized violence 1989–2024, and the challenges of identifying civilian victims. Journal of Peace Research, 62(4). (photograph by Uppsala Conflict Data Program UCDP)

This escalation is accompanied by a marked inability of major international organisations, starting with the United Nations, to exercise an effective role in mediation, protection, and reconstruction. In recent crises, the structural limitations of multilateral governance have emerged with increasing clarity: decision-making mechanisms paralysed by veto powers; peacekeeping mandates lacking political legitimacy and operational capacity; humanitarian frameworks struggling to address conflicts characterised by asymmetric actors, hybrid warfare, and the systematic targeting of civilian and cultural infrastructures[2]. As a result, international interventions often arrive late, operate with reduced scope, or remain confined to emergency responses that do not address the underlying territorial and socio-political conditions of violence. In many contexts, the absence of an authoritative external mediator has allowed protracted conflicts to harden into spatial regimes of segregation, displacement, and dispossession conditions in which the protection of

communities and their built environment becomes increasingly precarious[3].

THE ARCHITECT'S RESPONSIBILITY IN VIOLENT AND UNSTABLE CONTEXTS

Within this scenario, the architect's responsibility extends beyond the design of physical spaces. It concerns the protection of identities, both material and immaterial, that anchor communities to their histories and enable them to envision a future. Conflict does not simply destroy buildings, it fractures the spatial, cultural, and symbolic systems through which societies recognise themselves. Heritage becomes a battlefield, both physically and symbolically[4]. Architecture, therefore, must be understood as a discipline that transcends its technical aspects and addresses emergencies with tools that are fundamentally non-neutral. It is a form of context-specific knowledge, grounded in the cultural, social and environmental conditions that shape the lives of communities[5]. In settings marked by violence or structural oppression, architectural practice becomes a political act in the broad sense, a mode of engagement that interprets tensions, mediates between actors with divergent interests and translates local forms of experience into spatial configurations capable of offering protection and continuity. Seen in this light, designing in conflict-affected contexts requires acknowledging the depth of community-embedded knowledge systems and recognising the role that spatial practices play in maintaining identity, autonomy and everyday life[6]. From this perspective, the contemporary role of the architect intersects with three fundamental challenges: safeguarding the continuity of urban and rural landscapes whose identities are threatened by destruction or neglect; designing with and for communities whose rights, mobility, and access to services are systematically constrained; engaging critically with global frameworks, political, humanitarian, environmental, that shape reconstruction processes and often reproduce the asymmetries that generated conflict.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Against this background, the article adopts a theoretical and methodological lens that interprets reconstruction as an act of cultural reinstatement, spatial justice, and community re-anchoring[7]. Contemporary scholarship emphasises that rebuilding in contexts marked by prolonged violence requires a multidimensional approach that integrates heritage conservation, socio-spatial resilience, and participatory decision-making[8].
Architecture becomes a mediating practice situated at the intersection between collective memory, environmental constraints and political negotiation. It operates within a field where material reconstruction is inseparable from the restoration of social relations, institutional trust and cultural continuity[9].
Methodologically, the study combines qualitative and quantitative tools, privileging the direct involvement of local stakeholders and the co-production of knowledge to define needs, priorities and functional programmes. At the same time, rigorous environmental analysis is incorporated, recognising that post-conflict reconstruction must ensure comfort, reduced dependence on external energy sources and long-term operational sustainability. This dual lens, socially grounded and environmentally responsive, aims to produce architectural solutions that are technically viable, culturally rooted and capable of reinforcing community agency.

MOSUL AFTER ISIL/DAESH: A LANDSCAPE OF LOSS AND OPPORTUNITY

This framework is applied to the post-war reconstruction of the Old City of Mosul, a context that exemplifies the magnitude and complexity of contemporary conflicts. During more than three years of ISIL/Daesh occupation, Mosul experienced unprecedented intentional destruction of its cultural heritage. The subsequent military campaign to liberate the city further exacerbated the devastation.

UN-Habitat reports[10] describe a "desolate urban panorama", entire landmarks erased, thousands of dwellings collapsed or structurally compromised, infrastructure systems obliterated, and large sections rendered inaccessible due to rubble, debris and contamination from unexploded ordnance (figg. 2 and 3). Approximately sixty per cent of the historic urban fabric has been severely affected, with more than 550 buildings fully destroyed and nearly 5,000 damaged along the Tigris riverfront[11].

Figure 2. Entrance to Ekhlas School, after the liberation of Mosul (photograph by ARCò)
Figure 3. Back of Ekhlas School, after the liberation of Mosul (photograph by ARCò)

Within the broader framework of the international initiative *Revive the Spirit of Mosul*, UNESCO assumed a coordinating role in the city's cultural and educational recovery. This article explores one strand of that effort: the project developed by ARCò – Architettura e Cooperazione, winner of a UNESCO call aimed at creating a replicable approach to rebuilding Mosul's educational system. The initiative culminated in the design and construction of Ekhlas School, conceived as a best practice integrating community engagement, environmental responsiveness and the valorisation of local identities.

CASE STUDY: EKHLAS SCHOOL AS CONTEXT-SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE

The Ekhlas School project aligns with a body of research that interprets architecture in conflict-affected contexts through a context-specific knowledge capable of reconstructing spatial agency, reactivating local knowledge and restoring conditions of everyday life disrupted by violence. The design process adopts a multi-scalar methodological framework integrating urban analysis, climatic studies, social inquiry, and the symbolic interpretation of local heritage.

The project's methodological sequence began with focus groups involving municipal technicians, school management, teachers, parents, and the children who would use the new facilities (fig. 4).

Figure 4. Focus Groups Management (photograph by ARCò)

This participatory phase was essential for defining the functional programme and understanding expectations regarding safety, comfort and cultural belonging. Simultaneously, a typological and morphological study of local architectural traditions was conducted[12]. This analysis highlighted the relevance of courtyard spatiality and the widespread use of Musciarabia as devices ensuring privacy, passive shading, and natural light control. These findings informed the conceptual direction of the school, anchoring the design in spatial and cultural continuity.

Environmental sustainability was developed as an integrated layer of the project. The strategy combines passive cooling, material reinterpretation, and resource-efficient technologies, including shading devices, ventilated façades, interlocking courtyards, evapotranspiration-based cooling, water-reuse systems and photovoltaic integration. In adapting these principles to the needs of contemporary living, the project critically reinterprets them[13]. Traditional environmental mediators, such as the courtyard, the Musciarabia, or thick masonry walls, are reimagined through current construction techniques, optimised materials, and performance-based design analysis. This approach enables the spatial qualities of local architecture to be preserved while ensuring that the building meets current expectations of comfort, safety, accessibility and energy efficiency.

For instance, the courtyard, historically a climatic and social device, becomes a calibrated environmental engine capable of regulating temperature and airflow through its proportions, orientation and shading (figg. 5, 6 and 7).

Figure 5. View of the first courtyard of the Ekhlas School (image by ARCò)

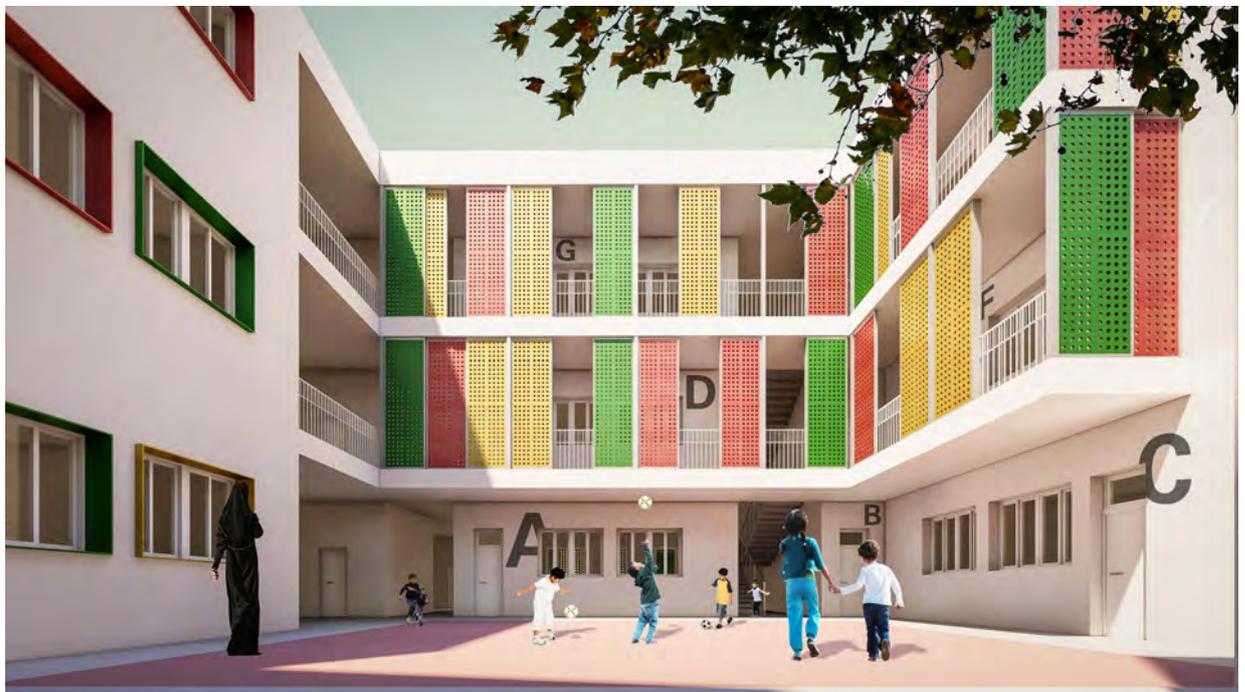Figure 6. View of the second courtyard of Ekhlas School (image by ARCò)

Figure 7. View of the third courtyard of Ekhlas School (image by ARCò)

The use of screened or permeable façades, inspired by Musciarabia, is translated into durable, low-maintenance systems that modulate daylight, enhance privacy, and reduce heat gain (figg. 8 and 9).

Figure 8. View of the new main entrance of Ekhlas School (image by ARCò)
Figure 9. View of the new back entrance of Ekhlas School (image by ARCò)

The integration of vegetation and evaporative surfaces updates the logic of traditional cooling through water and shade, while modern greywater recovery systems ensure that such features remain environmentally responsible in a resource-scarce context. Likewise, the adoption of photovoltaic panels and ventilated façades introduces forms of active and passive energy management that allow the school to operate with reduced dependence on external energy infrastructure, an essential condition in fragile, post-conflict settings.

CONCLUSION

We stand at a moment in history defined by escalating global fragility. The tragic landscape of post-conflict cities, like the Old City of Mosul, reveals destruction on a scale that challenges the very possibility of recovery. But it also reveals a profound truth about our discipline: rebuilding is not the act of repairing physical damage; it is the process of reconstituting cultural continuity.

The Ekhlas School project, conceived and executed in the wreckage of occupation and war, offers a critical prototype for this reconstitution. It demonstrates that architecture in conflict-affected contexts must operate simultaneously and with equal rigor across four registers: technical, environmental, cultural, social and political.

In the immediate aftermath of violence, the first registers we address are often the technical and the environmental. This is where competence is measured in stability, safety, and resilience.

But our technical decisions are not just about meeting building codes; they are about guaranteeing protection and durability in a world where structures have been systematically targeted. By integrating passive cooling strategies, leveraging local materials, and deploying resource-efficient technologies like water-reuse systems and photovoltaics, Ekhlas School reduces its dependency on external, fragile, or non-existent energy infrastructure. This technical and environmental self-reliance is the first step toward sovereignty. However, if we stop at the technical, we build only shells. The true healing, the restoration of identity, lies in the cultural and social registers. Conflict aims to erase. It targets the landmarks that embody collective memory, the courtyards, the distinct urban fabric. Reconstruction, therefore, must be an act of cultural reinstatement. By reinterpreting these traditional elements, the Ekhlas School design refused to abandon the spirit of Mosul. It ensures that the space is not foreign, but belonging. This leads us to the social register: the work of building trust. Through participatory focus groups involving children, parents, and teachers, the design process itself became a practice of spatial justice. It granted agency back to the community, ensuring the resulting space reflected not an external blueprint of what they should need, but their own articulated desires for comfort, safety, and cultural belonging.

Here is the essential point: the political dimension of this architecture is not something we design for initially, but something that inevitably emerges from the successful integration of the technical, environmental, cultural, and social factors. When a building stands on a foundation of sound, sustainable engineering (technical/environmental), and simultaneously fulfils memory and empowers its inhabitants (cultural/social), it fundamentally challenges the logic of conflict. It denies the perpetrators of violence the final victory of erasure.

The political act of the Ekhlas School is the successful reconstitution of continuity, continuity between past and present, continuity between communities and their environment, and continuity in everyday social practices. By restoring the community's capacity to use and shape its built world, by restoring spatial agency, we have performed an act of deep political significance.

Furthermore, architectural design becomes a form of spatial diplomacy, a practice that negotiates memory, resources, and future aspirations through the concrete reality of the built form. Ekhlas School stands as a powerful prototype for a culturally grounded, socially responsive, and environmentally conscious reconstruction, a clear signal that the future of Mosul will be authored, and built, by its own people.

NOTES

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95

THE UNCERTAIN PAST *ON PRESERVATION OF ARCHITECTURE IN THE BALKANS*

By Luka Skansi (Politecnico di Milano)

The aim of this text is to try to make visible—more through direct testimony than through scientific or academic analysis—what it means today to "preserve and restore the architectural heritage of the twentieth century" in those Balkan countries that were formed after 1991 following the disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia. To be precise, Slovenia will be excluded from the account, as it is a country that, unlike the other republics, has in recent times developed an interesting and, in many respects, enviable approach to the problem.

As an introduction to the challenges faced by Slavic historians and restorers, it is useful to frame the origins of the issue, namely the role and status that history assumes in general within these countries. Not so much the history of architecture, but rather political and social history—which, it is needless to repeat, is predominantly focused on the events of the bloody twentieth century in these lands—that, in the cyclical re-examination of its assumptions, today takes on a central role in political debate. This uncertainty inevitably affects the history of architecture as well: a discipline that may be ancillary to *historia magistra*, yet nonetheless acts as its vanguard when wars erupt against processes of historiographical revanchism.

A few years ago, on the walls of Belgrade's large residential blocks, in the days surrounding the crowded and widely attended student demonstrations—so scarcely reported and commented on by the Western press—a piece of graffiti appeared that is worth considering: "Prošlost dolazi. Samo dan je od nas" ("The past is coming. It is only a day away."). As often happens with popular intelligence, this graffiti subtly conceptualized certain contemporary tendencies of Balkan societies. On the one hand, and in positive terms, the graffiti reiterates the relevance of history—an immediacy that we historians record and embrace with undisguised self-interest: history is, after all, one of the few disciplines, together with geopolitics, that helps to dissect and explain the international crises we are experiencing, which are erupting—following the decline of Western political and cultural hegemony—with an unprecedented intensity.

However, for those who observe reality in its depth, the graffiti is also upsetting. And it is difficult to explain this to a West that is convinced, precisely, of the "end of history": convinced that a state of equilibrium has been reached after a path of democratic and Enlightenment progress, and that time has come to a halt, grounded in the certainties of the past. But "the past is coming" means, in non-Western countries—or rather, in countries that have followed an alternative modernity—that there is a continuous operation being carried out on the past, one that prepares for its constant reawakening.

The past is manipulated, re-discussed, rewritten, and in the Balkan countries it becomes, as a Serbian journalist has argued, "far more uncertain than the future"[1].

But how does all this relate to the interesting and, for various reasons, compelling student protests? And above all, who is truly active in these demonstrations? Alongside the protests sparked by a large group of university activists, all those inhabitants of Serbia who no longer identify with their despotic leader and in the corrupt, clientelistic administrative and economic system he has built over recent decades. Yet the demonstrators, beyond the usual grievances against "democratures"—calls for more justice, legality, democracy—introduce additional themes and symbols into their rhetoric, making participation in the streets far more widespread. The enormous number of people who took part in the mass uprisings was certainly drawn by criticism of the regime, but also by the clarity of a student message steeped in nationalism. Student symbolism alludes—albeit not exclusively, though this is a secondary issue—to the historical symbols of Serbian nation-building and its mythopoesis. In other words, criticism of corruption in the political system should not be misunderstood as criticism of national reason, as a critical revision of its myths, or as an importation of Western, universalist, bourgeois, metropolitan, modern values.

Turning to another example, and drawing a wholly unjust comparison with the Serbian demonstrations, one may cite an event that occurred a few months ago in Croatia (also largely ignored in the West), which nevertheless reflects the same status of history. Approximately five hundred thousand people attended a concert by a nationalist, neo-Ustaša singer who glorifies collaborationism and genocide during the Second World War[2]. By a simple mathematical comparison (Croatia has just under four million inhabitants), this would be equivalent to 7.5 million Italians attending a neo-fascist concert, or 10.5 million Germans attending a neo-Nazi one.
Supported by a futuristic drone performance, the singer displayed on stage the iconography of contemporary Croatian nationalism: swords evoking mythological medieval purities, crosses and profiles of the Madonna of Medjugorje reaffirming the identikit of the good nationalist—church, homeland, and family—all steeped in profound anti-Serbian and anti-Yugoslav sentiment. Among the participants, the majority consisted of younger generations—those who did not experience the civil war, who grew up with its recurring memory, and who are above all products of the national education system. A system that is a result of an operation of historical rewriting which, as in all Balkan countries, has been institutional and political, and which has seen textbooks entirely transformed through the reversal of narratives[3].

So, what kind of narrative are we talking about? First of all, the re-evaluation of the role of collaborators during the Second World War, who were numerous across Yugoslav territory: from the Slovenian belogardists, to the Croatian Ustaša, to the Serbian Chetniks. Then comes the rewriting of the communist resistance, which—from being the most widespread and numerous resistance movement in all of Europe—has been relegated to the dimension of a criminal faction. Consequently, a terrifyingly problematic process has been initiated: the celebration of the victims of resistance and of the communist victory—those figures now glorified in public squares, tattooed onto the skin of new generations, and responsible for the atrocities committed by collaborators together with the Nazi-fascists during the Second World War.

It is obvious that this now-dominant process did not originate in recent years. Its roots can certainly be traced back to the 1980s, with the economic and moral crisis experienced by Yugoslav society following Tito's death. But as historians well know, the masking and appropriation of history has been a leitmotif of all twentieth-century political regimes in this part of the Balkans—from the Kingdom of Yugoslavia formed after the Great War on the ashes of the Austro-Hungarian collapse, to Tito's socialism after 1945[4]. However, the violence with which this process is carried out today is undoubtedly unprecedented and has its origins in what the great architect Bogdan Bogdanović defined as the second great tragedy of the Yugoslav wars: urbicide[5]. Alongside the indescribable human losses, we witnessed the tragedies of cities—symbols of the systematic elimination of national and religious identities: Bosnian-Muslim in Mostar, Serbian-Orthodox in Lika and Krajina, Croatian-Catholic in Vukovar and Dubrovnik, just to name very few examples.

Many other cases could be cited, but what should be emphasized here is that urbicide in the Balkan wars affected also—and sometimes above all—contemporary architecture. From the Sarajevo 1984 Olympic complex, to the destruction of partisan memorials in nearly all the republics, to the bombing of Nikola Dobrović's *Generalštab* in Belgrade[6] (the latter carried out by NATO aircraft), the list is extremely long. It is crucial to understand how war represented not only moments of civil conflict and ethnic cleansing, but also a process of eliminating history—especially when observing contemporary architecture, the one that has been built during socialism: its distruction talks about the elimination of a history that could no longer and should no longer serve as a source of identification. First and foremost, the history that recalled the resistance: a moment in which Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Montenegrins and Macedonians together, united in the liberation movement across all social classes—from peasants and workers to doctors and teachers—rebelled against nationalisms, clericalism, and Nazi-fascist oppressors and occupiers. And consequently, also socialist history, which embodied the brotherhood and unity of peoples above all individualism and specific national or religious identities.
 In this sense, it is not difficult to understand why the largest abstract sculpture in Europe, created by Vojin Bakić in Kamensko in eastern Slavonia to symbolize resistance on a territorial scale, was blown up by Croatian soldiers as early as 1991. Or why many other monuments were razed, demolished, or simply desecrated and thus stripped of their original meaning—most famously the Petrova Gora monument, also by Vojin Bakić, whose stainless-steel cladding was stripped and resold. It should be specified that this process of eliminating the masterpieces of Yugoslav architecture did not occur only during the war, but is still dramatically ongoing. The beautiful Partisan Cemetery designed by Bogdan Bogdanović in Mostar (fig. 1) is periodically vandalized by neo-Ustaša groups, who hammer away at and destroy what remains of the site[7].

This is a widespread process with many different nuances, comprehensible only through geographical contextualization of the monuments. The memorial complex at Kozara, located in the Serbian enclave of western Bosnia, has not been destroyed.
However, at the entrance to this work by Dušan Džamonja, Miro Rak, Mirjana Hanžeković (fig. 2) —one of the most extraordinary landscape architecture projects of socialist Yugoslavia—a process of resemanticization has taken place. A large Orthodox cross has recently appeared to identify and mark the (Serbian) identity of the resistance, thereby eliminating its original message: a symbol of the brotherhood of all Yugoslav peoples. Here too, history is

rewritten, and by individualizing the resistance, the contemporary spatial experience and perception of the complex are highly conditioned.

Figure 1. Bogdan Bogdanović, Memorial and partisan cemetery, Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1960-1965 (photograph by the author)

Figure 2. Dušan Džamonja, Miro Rak, Mirjana Hanžeković, Monument to the Revolution at Mrakovica, Kozara, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1972 (photograph by the author)

A striking case must also be highlighted—one that should be observed in its radicality not as a norm, but as a unicum. Skopje, the capital of North Macedonia, as is well known, was entirely rebuilt after the 1960 earthquake according to Kenzo Tange's plan (fig. 3).

Figure 3. Skopje – architectural cladding, 2015 (photograph by the author)

Following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the young Macedonian democracy, together with its political leaders, decided no longer to identify with this reconstruction, carried out by both Yugoslav professionals and international architects[8]. Although it did not experience armed conflict (despite severe social tensions with the Albanian component), Macedonia lived out its hostility toward socialism by imposing a redesign of its capital. Most of the buildings along the Vardar River were recently entirely clad in eclectic, neoclassical, and postmodern styles, constructing a fake historical landscape bordering on a contemporary amusement park. This was accompanied by a sculptural mythopoiesis permeating the entire public space and culminating in an equestrian statue of Alexander the Great: the great leader of the Argead dynasty, the ancient Greek royal house, becomes in contemporary interpretation the origin of the Slavic population that settled here ten centuries after his death. The audacity of historical rewriting reaches in Skopje its most surreal levels.

Further processes of widespread destruction can be observed in other geographical contexts. For example, the tourist architecture built along the Adriatic coast, which reached sophisticated heights during the 1970s. The "socialist Arcadia," aptly defined by Maroje Mrduljaš[9], highlights the country's economic boom, which planned and built summer holiday facilities for the working classes. The Haludovo Hotel, designed by Boris Magaš on the island of Krk, is one of the most famous complexes of this type (fig. 4): a modern, strongly contextual architecture resting on steep terrain sloping toward the sea and integrating various design and spatial themes.

Figure 4. Boris Magaš, Hotel Haludovo, Malinska, Island of Krk, Croatia, 1972 (photograph by the author)

The hotel perfectly narrates the transition from the socialist system to the market economy following Croatian independence. The state-owned company that possessed the complex was privatized by entrepreneurs close to the new political current, and rather than continuing what was a fairly profitable activity, put the property on the market. The complex was fragmented; some bungalows were resold, while the central building was sold to an Armenian entrepreneur in a money-laundering operation and left to decay. What we see today is an architecture reduced to ruins, lost forever.

Rather than continuing to enumerate forms of devastation and erasure, the discussion should turn to what are, for us, the crucial questions: how can history be practiced in these places today—or, more specifically in our case, the history of architecture? What margins remain for speaking about architecture under these political and cultural conditions? And within what limits can one truly attempt to raise public awareness on the quality of these modern architectures?

Much work has recently been done by scholars from universities as well as by architects and activists across the various republics. Exhibitions, conferences, and publications over the past fifteen years have increased knowledge and awareness of this extraordinary heritage. Its international recognition came in 2018 with the opening of the exhibition *Toward a Concrete Utopia* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, curated by Vladimir Kulić and Martino Stierli, who involved a large group of local researchers[10]. Work has also been carried out—and is still ongoing—on the cataloguing, explanation, and conceptualization of the phenomena that led to the emergence, flourishing, and, alas, destruction of this heritage.

Yet very little has actually been achieved. Only to a limited extent, through isolated initiatives and far from simple processes, has there been valorization or restoration of some masterpieces of Yugoslav architecture. Opposition—sometimes concealed, sometimes explicit—continues to heavily condition the debate and obstruct any initiative.

When Rijeka was designated "European Capital of Culture" in 2020, exhibitions and artistic installations were organized, working to raise awareness of the places and symbols of this city's extraordinary history[11]. Reactions were swift. Fans of the local football team, supported by far-right activists—the core group invested in by politicians to undermine democracy and civic and cultural engagement—organized a protest against one of the artistic interventions, unable to tolerate the evocation of history itself. The object of the protest was the supposedly unacceptable display of a red star on the roof of a building by Umberto Nordio, an important Triestine architect who, on the eve of the Second World War, created an icon of fascist domination over the city. With this installation, artist Nemanja Cvijanović celebrates the moment when Fiume was liberated by communist partisans (and certainly not by Ustaša collaborators)[12]. Specifically recalling the resemanticization carried out in 1945 by the new political order, when a series of red flags were displayed in the bays of the façade of that architectural rationalism—a symbol of the Italianization of the city. It is worth reiterating the paradox: the recent protest was directed against the liberators, who had the merit of drawing the borders of today's Croatia—and thus "returning" Rijeka to its homeland—by expelling foreign oppressors and their collaborators (the Ustaša), with whom the nationalist protesters identify.

In conclusion, the reflection begins with a historical photograph. In an early twentieth-century image, one sees a restaurant in Rijeka bearing inscriptions in all the languages spoken in the city at that time (fig. 5), reflecting the four great civilizations that have always lived in the northern Adriatic: Austro-German, Italian, Magyar, and Slavic (Croatian) culture.

Figure 5. Rijeka, "Trattoria / Vendéglő Al Paolo", beginning of XX century

The recurring crises, wars, fascisms, and civil conflicts that followed throughout the twentieth century progressively erased these inscriptions one by one. After 1991, the city became almost exclusively Croatian, losing a

significant portion of the other Yugoslav ethnic groups as well. The process, however, is far from complete.

With recent developments, historic centers along the coast are beginning to lose even their last remaining inhabitants. Something impossible to contain has arrived: large-scale, tourism-driven capital has definitively penetrated Croatian cities, bringing masses of tourists who have emptied symbolic urban spaces of everyday life—spaces historically fiercely fought over. As always, the city pays the price, as does architecture, both historical and more contemporary, which is transformed in function and image, completely losing its original meaning. The cruel course of history has now taken on the guise of urban speculation, whose ethno-religious affiliation entirely eludes definition—a foe against which even the most radical nationalism seems to have neither weapons, motivation or, worst of all, conscience.

NOTES

[1] The sentence is attributed to journalist Stojan Cerović, one of the founders of the weekly "Vreme".   [2] The Ustaše was a Croatian fascist and ultranationalist organization active between 1929 and 1945. After the invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941, the Ustaše came to power when they were appointed to rule a part of Axis-occupied Yugoslavia as the Independent State of Croatia (NDH), a puppet state established by Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. During World War II, the Ustaše went on to perpetrate the genocide killing hundreds of thousands of Serbs, Jews, Roma, as well as Muslim and Croat political dissidents. The ideology of the movement was a blend of fascism, Roman Catholicism and Croatian ultranationalism. Source: English Wikipedia page; the Croatian one has a "slightly" different historical interpretation of the facts.   [3] Stojanović, Dubravka. 2023. *Prošlost dolazi*. *Promene u tumačenju prošlosti u srpskim udžbenicima istorije 1913-2021*. Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek.   [4] Pirjevec, Jože. 1993. *Il Giorno di san Vito*. *Jugoslavia 1918-1992: storia di una tragedia*. Torino: Nuova Eri.   [5] Bogdanović, Bogdan. 1994. *Grad i smrt*. Beograd: Beogradski krug.   [6] Kulić, Vladimir. 2009. *Architettura e politica dell'interpretazione: il caso del Generalštab a Belgrado*. Roma: Fondazione Bruno Zevi; Davenport, Ben. 2015. "A Heritage of Resistance' – The Changing Meanings of Belgrade's Generalštab". In *War and Cultural Heritage,* edited by Marie Louise Stig Sørensen, Dacia Viejo-Rose. New York: Cambridge University Press.   [7] On these topics ee Sanja Horvatinčić research, the leading expert in the field of memorial art and architecture in former Yugoslavia, and her analyses of their status in modern Croatia. Her recent publication: Žerovc, Beti; Horvatinčić, Sanja (eds). 2023. *Shaping revolutionary memory: the production of monuments in socialist Yugoslavia*. Ljubljana/Berlin: Archive Books.

DISPLAYING THE PRESENT
PRESERVATION, CURATION, AND EXHIBITION-MAKING

By Ekaterina Golovatyuk (GRACE)

ABSTRACT

This essay examines the museum as a site in which a provisional awareness of the present is constructed through acts of display. Drawing on my own practice as an architect, exhibition designer, and architectural curator, the text explores the conceptual and methodological proximity between curation and preservation, arguing that this relationship constitutes a critical resource for engaging contemporary cultural conditions. Rather than treating these practices as distinct, the essay approaches them as overlapping modes of operation that act upon the same institutional, spatial, and historical terrain. The discussion situates contemporary museum display within a broader historical trajectory, tracing shifts from nineteenth-century total environments and modernist claims of spatial neutrality to the late twentieth-century dominance of the market-driven "white cube." It argues that this paradigm, while pervasive, has significantly narrowed the museum's capacity for self-reflection and critique. In response, the essay proposes an understanding of display as an inherently precarious and constructed operation—one that, drawing on the work of Boris Groys and Giorgio Agamben, stages the present at a critical distance as fractured, contradictory, and unresolved.

Through a series of project-based case studies—the Hermitage Museum, the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow, and the Tselinny Center for Contemporary Culture in Almaty—the essay demonstrates how curatorial tools can be mobilized to address questions of preservation and modernization, and how preservation logic can, in turn, inform exhibition-making. These projects illustrate alternative approaches in which architectural intervention recedes in favor of authorial regimes of display, subtraction, and selective preservation, allowing historical material to remain active within contemporary experience.

Ultimately, the essay argues for the museum not as a finished or neutral container, but as a "living" and provisional construct—one capable of holding contradictions, exposing temporal tensions, and enabling critical readings of the present through spatial and curatorial means.

INTRODUCTION

This essay is an attempt to contextualize my own work—as an exhibition designer, an architect, and at times an architectural curator—within a

broader understanding of the role of museums and exhibition display in the present. Rather than positioning these roles as separate, the text approaches them as overlapping modes of practice that operate on the same cultural terrain. Central to this terrain is the conceptual proximity between curation and preservation, two concerns that are fundamental to my work. I argue that a conscious engagement with this proximity enables the construction of critical readings of specific cultural issues and of the present moment, in general.

The essay does not propose a linear history of museums, nor does it seek to offer a comprehensive theory of exhibition design. It assembles a series of historical observations, institutional critiques, and project-based reflections that together articulate my position.

MUSEUMS AND THE PRESENT

Museums have always been institutions of the present, even when their collections consist primarily of historic artworks. Beyond functioning as repositories of artefacts, museums—since their emergence in the late eighteenth century—have translated the values of a given society through both the objects they chose to display and the ways in which these objects were installed.

With the rise of nation states in nineteenth-century Europe, museums became instrumental in constructing shared historical narratives of human progress. These narratives supported the political and cultural agendas of the time, often presenting history as a linear, cumulative process leading toward the present. The museum thus operated as a space in which collective identity was staged through displayed artefacts, exhibition design and architecture[1]. Alongside the canonical salon hanging, museums frequently presented immersive total environments—similar to Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*—, in which the works of art, exhibition furniture, and architecture were conceived as parts of a single concept. A few decades earlier, early Romanticism introduced an alternative paradigm centered on individual contemplation of art and the apparent absence of mediation. This ideal of direct, unframed engagement with the artwork would later be absorbed into the logic of commercial display, where the object is presented as self-sufficient.

MODERNISM, DISPLAY, AND CONTRADICTION

The radical social, political, and technological transformations of the early twentieth century produced entirely new forms of art, which in turn demanded new institutional models and display strategies. Experiments at the Bauhaus and Vkhutemas in Europe and the USSR, along with initiatives at the Fogg Museum and later the Museum of Modern Art in the United States, shaped modernist display paradigms grounded in white walls, minimalist architecture, and assertions of spatial neutrality. Although justified differently across decades, these paradigms gradually established a dominant visual and spatial language for exhibiting modern art[2].

Yet alongside the consolidation of the white wall as a norm, radically different practices emerged. Marcel Duchamp's exhibitions and Kurt Schwitters's Merzbau reintroduced totalizing and immersive environments that blurred distinctions between artwork, display, and architecture. Unlike the nineteenth-century total installations, which conveyed harmony, cohesion, and cultural affirmation, these early twentieth-century experiments

expressed tension, irony, instability and contradiction.

Parallel to these developments, exhibition practices—shaped by emerging psychological theories and by the diffusion of retail display strategies—began to reflect wider societal transformations, most notably the shift from citizen to consumer, particularly evident in the United States from the 1930s onward. In this context, the artwork was increasingly presented as an autonomous entity, ostensibly free of mediation, while the exhibition space was reduced to a neutral setting, in support of the dynamics of the emerging art market.

POSTWAR SHIFTS AND THE RISE OF THE EXHIBITION

In the postwar period, the dissolution of a unified historical narrative into multiple narratives profoundly altered museum practice. Permanent displays lost their privileged status, while temporary exhibitions became the dominant mode of presentation. Even permanent collections were increasingly staged as provisional exhibitions, subject to revision and reinterpretation over time. Within this context, the curator acquired a central and expanded role. No longer limited to the care, classification, and presentation of objects, curators emerged as authors of narratives and mediators between artworks and the public. It is during this period that the tension between museum display and art market display paradigms became particularly evident.

THE MARKET PARADIGM PREVAILS

The commercial display paradigm became dominant toward the end of the twentieth century, shaping both new museum buildings and the transformation of existing institutions. The spatial and aesthetic language of the art market—white walls, presumed neutrality, diffused lighting —was absorbed into museum architecture and display.

In my view, the dominance of this paradigm significantly reduced the space for critical reflection, not only in spatial terms but also curatorially. Rather than being precarious, self-critical, ironic, or unscripted—qualities that are essential for remaining receptive to one's own time—the prevailing museum model tends to reproduce self-celebratory 'white cubes', often wrapped in extravagant architectural envelopes and surrounded by an aura of unquestioned importance.

Architecture that once embodied cultural experimentation progressively constrains the forms of experience and imagination the museum was meant to liberate. Internally, the "white cube," as described by Brian O'Doherty[3], functions as a supposedly neutral container that erases historical, political, and social context. Externally, "architectural extravagance and growth in scale function"[4] mark the institutional relevance.

MUSEUMS AS MASS CULTURE

Paradoxically, museums have never been more numerous nor more popular than in the last three decades. As they have become part of mass culture[5], their proliferation across continents, driven by tourism and the cultural economy, has generated new prototypes structured around spectacle and consumption. In this shift, the spatial neutrality fully synchronized with market logic: frictionless, anesthetic, and ultimately indistinguishable from one context to another[6].

Today, when most museums are bathed in the same clinical glow, the challenge, in my view, is not so much to design better exhibitions but to critically interrogate the act of display itself, engaging all available resources—including architecture—to continually reconceptualize it and to restore its capacity to hold contradictions in space and articulate difficult or critical positions.

PRESERVATION AND THE MUSEUM

Architecture, however, also carries its own—though not unrelated—agenda, within which preservation has increasingly been understood as the safeguarding not only of buildings as shells, but of their spatial, material, and symbolic qualities. This understanding stands in open contrast to the widespread museological practice of converting historic interiors into 'white cubes', following the art market logic described earlier. There have been and there are, of course, exceptions, and one early yet particularly radical example is Franco Russoli's interrupted project for the renovation and expansion of Brera.

RUSSOLI AND THE LIVING MUSEUM

Russoli's project—documented in *Senza utopia non si fa la realtà. Scritti sul Museo (1952–1977)*—offers a compelling alternative to the dominant museum paradigm. Central to Russoli's thinking was the concept of the "living museum," initially articulated by Fernanda Wittgens and later developed by Russoli as a dynamic, socially engaged organism. Within this vision, exhibition, curation, education, collecting, production, and the relationship with contemporaneity were continuously questioned and rethought[7].

His vision materialized most clearly in a three-year exhibition cycle initiated during the temporary closure of Brera's permanent collection, in preparation for its restructuring and expansion into Palazzo Citterio as part of the Grande Brera project. The cycle culminated in the 1976 exhibition *Processo per un museo* (Museum on Trial), which critically dismantled the museum's institutional components and assumptions.

Across different rooms, the museum was exposed in all its dimensions: as a legal entity, as a concept, as a non-exhibition, as a project, as a construction site, as a space of social gathering and debate, and as a place where contemporary artists entered into dialogue with historic works. In an almost Duchampian spirit, exhibition, bureaucracy, preservation, construction work, and public debate became inseparable and were curated over time as a single process.

A number of recent projects, most of which I or my office GRACE were involved in, in my view, provide examples that reflect similar or complementary approaches to Russoli's vision.

CASE STUDIES

The Hermitage Museum[8]
The Hermitage project is an exploration of what happens when architectural intervention gives way to curatorial thinking.

In the early 2000s, the Hermitage was granted the General Staff Building—located across Palace Square from the Winter Palace—and

commissioned OMA to develop a project for its integration into the museum complex.

Unlike institutions such as the Louvre or the British Museum, the Hermitage had remained largely unmodernized due to a long lack of funding. As a result, it preserved an unusual degree of imperfection and functioned almost as an institutional utopia, seemingly uninterested in expansion, while other major museums rapidly increased in scale and "excess" mirroring the rise of the market economy[9].

The General Staff Building is a complex structure with nearly 800 rooms of varying dimensions, organized around four courtyards. Designed in early 19th century by Carlo Rossi to house military staff offices, it presented a radically different spatial condition from the rest of the Hermitage. To understand how to work with it, OMA first examined the Hermitage as a whole.

Rem Koolhaas was particularly fascinated by the fact that the Hermitage was already one of the largest museums in the world in terms of collection size, yet it attracted relatively few visitors. This combination of immense scale, extraordinary density of artifacts, and limited public pressure suggested the possibility of a more subtle and contemporary way of engaging with art. Although this assumption later proved optimistic, it shaped OMA's approach. The project ultimately became an exercise in quantities on the one side: approximately 1,200 existing rooms, combined with 800 new ones, produced a vast repertoire of conditions. Some rooms were historically protected, others damaged and therefore transformable. On the other, the project looked at museum's virtues. By contemporary museums standards, the Hermitage was a disaster: there was barely any climate control, paint peeling off the walls, natural light streaming through the windows. Yet the experience of the art works was exceptionally intense. Given the historical significance of the palace and its location, here art and history coexisted in a completely unmediated way.

For example, Kazimir Malevich's Black Square hung between white cascading curtains, accompanied by an oversized label, protected by theatrical rope stanchions, and illuminated by a buzzing fluorescent light. Despite—or perhaps because of—this crude set up, the experience of the work was more powerful than in any renovated museum. OMA began to realize that the Hermitage's failure to modernize had allowed it to preserve a level of intensity and immediacy that had been lost elsewhere. The central question thus became whether it was possible to modernize the museum without damaging this condition and whether Hermitage can become the "prototype for resistance"[10] to the growing excesses of other institutions.

Given that the General Staff Building contained 800 rooms of radically different character, OMA proposed a counterintuitive strategy: rather than intervening architecturally, the architects would "do nothing" and act instead as curators or intellectuals, exploring how the existing stock of rooms could be activated through different authorial regimes.

This included imagining schedules in which different rooms would open and close over time or introducing contemporary art in the highly preserved historic interiors and placing the most valuable historic works in the more neglected rooms. One of the most radical proposals was to dedicate eight rooms each year to individual figures—artists, scientists, or thinkers—and to continue this process over a century, gradually assembling a living archive of the era's cultural and intellectual production in 800 rooms of the General Staff building.

Koolhaas stated: "All of these insights created a very strong conviction in us that what we at the Hermitage wanted to do was abstain from any architectural work, and act strictly as curators or as intellectuals in seeing whether the stock of rooms and the environment could be enhanced without adding anything new but simply imagining a more authorial regime"[11].

The Hermitage research, continued in 2008[12], also prompted a reflection on systems of display. The museum's elegant vitrines—often dismissed as "invisible" containers—became themselves objects of exhibition, bearing witness to changing philosophies of collecting and display, and thus to the historical development of the museum. By exhibiting empty vitrines in chronological sequence, the project transformed them from neutral supports into protagonists of the museum's own history.

Garage Museum of Contemporary Art
Between 2011 and 2015, I worked as part of OMA team on the transformation of the former restaurant Vremena Goda into the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow. This project directly applies some ideas developed for the Hermitage project and, in a way, represents the synthesis of many themes on which OMA and AMO have been working for years.
Among these themes are conservation (or preservation, in OMA's terms) and a critique of the contemporary museum paradigm—an argument that also forms the basis of this essay.
Founded in 2008, Garage takes its name from its first location: a bus depot designed by the Constructivist architect Konstantin Melnikov. In 2011, the museum was forced to seek a new location and subsequently occupied an abandoned 1960s building in Gorky Park, commissioning OMA to design the project.
OMA's strong interest with preservation—particularly with 1960s architecture—was synthesized in the exhibition *Cronocaos*, presented at the Venice Biennale in 2010[13].
In militant tone the exhibition claimed that while the world is being modernized at an increasingly rapid pace, another parallel phenomenon is taking place: ever larger portions of our planet are being "declared immutable" through "various preservation regimes". If in the 19th century humanity preserved ancient monuments, today the list of protected heritage has expanded to include concentration camps, casinos, highways or entire cultural landscapes.
Beginning with the French Revolution and the onset of rapid industrialization, concern for preservation grew in direct relation to processes of modernization. The more change is possible, the more it is critical to decide what should remain the same. Besides preserving an ample variety of cultural and natural objects, also the time interval between today and the date of what we decide to preserve is becoming shorter.
This interest has not been uniform across all categories of heritage. In particular, the architecture of the 1960s–1980s—closely associated with social values and a strong public sector—long remained marginal within preservation agendas. With the rise of neoliberalism, this architecture came to be regarded as irrelevant and was often blamed for many of today's urban and social problems. As a result, until relatively recently it was widely neglected and, in many contexts—including Russia—systematically demolished.
The abandoned building into which Garage decided to move was called *Vremena Goda (or Four Seasons in Russian)* and was originally conceived as a prototype for a café for 1,200 people, designed by a talented Soviet architect, Igor Vinogradsky. The idea was to replicate many identical cafés across the Soviet Union. Ultimately, only two were built, both in Moscow, and one got demolished in the early 2000s. The building that survived (at Gorky Park), was constructed in 1968 and was very popular for the first 20 years of its existence; after the collapse of the regime in 1991, it was abandoned.

The abandoned building into which Garage decided to move was known as Vremena Goda (Four Seasons in Russian). It was originally conceived as a prototype for a café accommodating up to 1,200 people and was designed by the Soviet architect Igor Vinogradsky. The intention was to replicate this type across the Soviet Union; ultimately, only two such cafés were built, both in Moscow, one of which was demolished in the early 2000s. The surviving building, completed in 1968 in Gorky Park, was widely popular during its first two decades before being abandoned following the collapse of the regime in 1991.

Between the height of its activity and the condition in which we encountered it in 2011, the building had undergone profound transformation. The building was reduced a façade-less ruin. But despite two decades of abandonment, during which the building was exposed to the weather, it was still in good condition, even structurally. More importantly, it preserved a sense of generosity and a collective aura typical of Soviet architecture. It also had good proportions and dimensions, both for accommodating people and for exhibiting art, as well as the beautiful views of the park.

In order to preserve the building and adapt it for the museum programs, the project proposed enclosing it within a new façade composed of three layers of polycarbonate. This new skin would protect the building from the weather and would translate views of the park into abstract images, almost like paintings by Gerhard Richter.
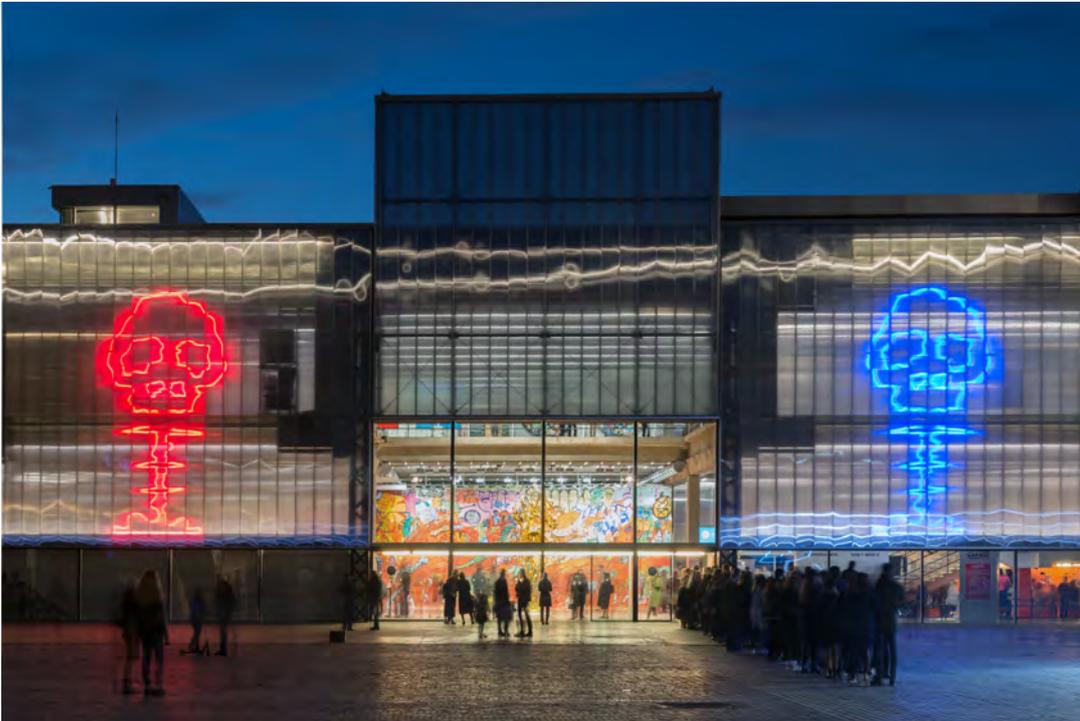

Figure 1. Garage Museum of Contemporary Art Takashi Murakami. Under the Radiation Falls Exterior view from the Gorky Park, 2017. Photo by Alexey Naroditsky

The new façade was conceived as a multifunctional element. Raised more than two meters above ground level, it established a visual connection between the park and the public activities on the museum's ground floor. It could be strategically illuminated to communicate the museum's life outward toward the park, while also accommodating emergency staircases and other elements

required to meet contemporary safety standards. Crucially, the façade served as a carrier for ventilation ducts and other MEP infrastructure, minimizing their impact within the exhibition spaces. In this way, the façade effectively became a non-declared "junkspace,"[14] mediated by layers of polycarbonate. At the museum entrance, two façade sections measuring 9 × 11 meters slid vertically. These large doors created a symbolic cut through the central atrium, visually connecting the park to the building's interior and revealing a double-height space formed by the removal of part of the upper-level slab to accommodate large-scale works. The project thus operated as an envelope–infrastructure that allowed the "ruin" within to be preserved while enabling it to function as a museum.

Museum programs occupied three levels, adapting to the spatial and structural possibilities of the existing building. The more fragmented spaces in the eastern part—where the original core with stairs, services, and kitchens was located—were dedicated to educational and research programs, while the large open spaces in the western area were assigned to exhibitions, projects, and events. The configuration of the existing building thus offered a wide range of conditions for exhibiting art, moving beyond the logic of the white cube and encouraging more varied and site-specific curatorial approaches. Although the building was largely prefabricated, the project deliberately preserved nearly all its existing components with great care, treating them as if they were fragments of an ancient Roman basilica. This was among the first significant efforts in Moscow to preserve postwar Soviet modernism, and OMA sought to assert that this architecture—despite belonging to a period shaped by a very different social and political agenda—could still be relevant today. In the project, the Soviet past, with all its ideological contradictions, was neither glorified nor condemned, but instead integrated into the spatial experience of the museum.

The exhibitions subsequently hosted within this architecture—ranging from Louise Bourgeois, Thomas Demand, Takashi Murakami, Pavel Pepperstein and other solo or collective shows—inevitably entered into dialogue, or at times into tension, with the building's history. The near absence of white walls compelled curators to think critically about each exhibition and to make deliberate, site-specific decisions regarding display.

The exhibition "Takashi Muarakami. Under the Radiation Falls" was held in 2017-2018[15]. The curatorial text by Ekaterina Inozemtseva declared that the five sections of the exhibition, "each examining a phenomenon in Japanese culture formally and semantically explored by Murakami" structured the exhibition, revealing "the artist's inquiry into Japanese public consciousness, blurring the boundary between high and low culture [...]"[16].

Across the museum's 3,500 sqm exhibition space, a distinct spatial strategy was developed for each exhibition chapter, mediating between Murakami's iconic works and the architecture of the former Soviet public building.

The first chapter *Geijutsu* (Learning and Technique) addressed the origins of Murakami's pictorial language. The classical hanging of his works alongside those of traditional Japanese masters in the Skylight Room (one of the two small 'white cube' like rooms in the museum – the former kitchen of the soviet restaurant) emphasized a continuity of subject matter and technique. *The Little Boy and the Fat Man*, the second chapter located in the Central Gallery, examined the impact of August 1945 bombings on postwar Japanese visual culture. A dense assemblage of Murakami's works, photography, manga, and anime revealed the close relationship between his practice and mass culture. The works were displayed on white mesh panels arranged in a rigid grid, creating a "field condition" that dissolved hierarchies and encouraged multiple interpretive paths within this staged archive.

Figure 2. Garage Museum of Contemporary Art Takashi Murakami. Under the Radiation Falls Exhibition view, The Little Boy and the Fat Man, 2017. Photo by Alexey Naroditsky

The third section, *Kawaii*, immersed visitors in an aesthetic of cuteness and denial, conceived as an escape from memories of war. Four environments along the East Gallery combined recurring elements from Murakami's oeuvre—bright fabrics, flower wallpaper, gold film, and manga toys—into four immersive installations, the latter inspired by Nakano Broadway in Tokyo. The fourth part of the exhibition, *Sutajito*, reproduced a functioning fragment of Murakami's studio. Within a factory-like setting, the artist's assistants worked during the installation period to execute and complete artworks. After the exhibition opening, the public could observe the Fordist organization of the studio and the intricate logistics underlying the production process. Finally, *Asobi and Kazari* section extended Murakami's interest in ornament beyond the galleries, infiltrating the café, bookshop, lobby, bathrooms and ultimately the façade, where two monumental neon skulls animated the building exterior.

The encounter between the art and the building, mediated by the exhibition scenography, took various forms: coexistence, dialogue, collision, substitution, which generated new ways of reading both Murakami's work and the building itself.

The exhibition design alternated the raw building walls, the white metallic mesh or wallpaper as paintings' backdrop, each deforming the perception of the works. Set against the Soviet bricks and tiles, Murakami's *superflat* paintings appeared even 'flatter', their precision resulted inhuman compared to the raw and slopy soviet construction details, while when installed on the wallpaper they playfully blurred the boundary between art and product design. While this contrast and contextualization initially unsettled the artist, it ultimately prompted the production of new works conceived in direct response to architecture. For example, cute monsters' heads were playfully suspended over the soviet mosaic in the foyer depicting a young floating woman, who represented autumn. One of the monster's colorful tongue reached toward the figure's hand, banally echoing the gesture from

Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* in the Sistine Chapel. Beyond this intentionally "easy" analogy, the monsters' presence freed the mosaic from its monumentality, transforming it into a quirky retro anime. At the same time, it revealed how the Soviet composition and its subdued tones resisted the consumerist pressure to become mere entertainment.

Figure 3. Garage Museum of Contemporary Art. Takashi Murakami. Under the Radiation Falls Exhibition view, museum foyer, 2017. Photo by Alexey Naroditsky

In a completely different way, the 2015 exhibition *Structures of Existence: The Cells of Louise Bourgeois*[17] seamlessly merged with the building, as if it had always been part of it. The unique series of sculptural environments that Bourgeois created in the last two decades of her life seemed either to mimic elements of the equipment within the polycarbonate façade or unrestored fragments of the museum itself. This blurring of the boundary between art and architecture transformed the building into the largest, yet still very intimate, 'cell,' absorbing the entire activity of the museum.
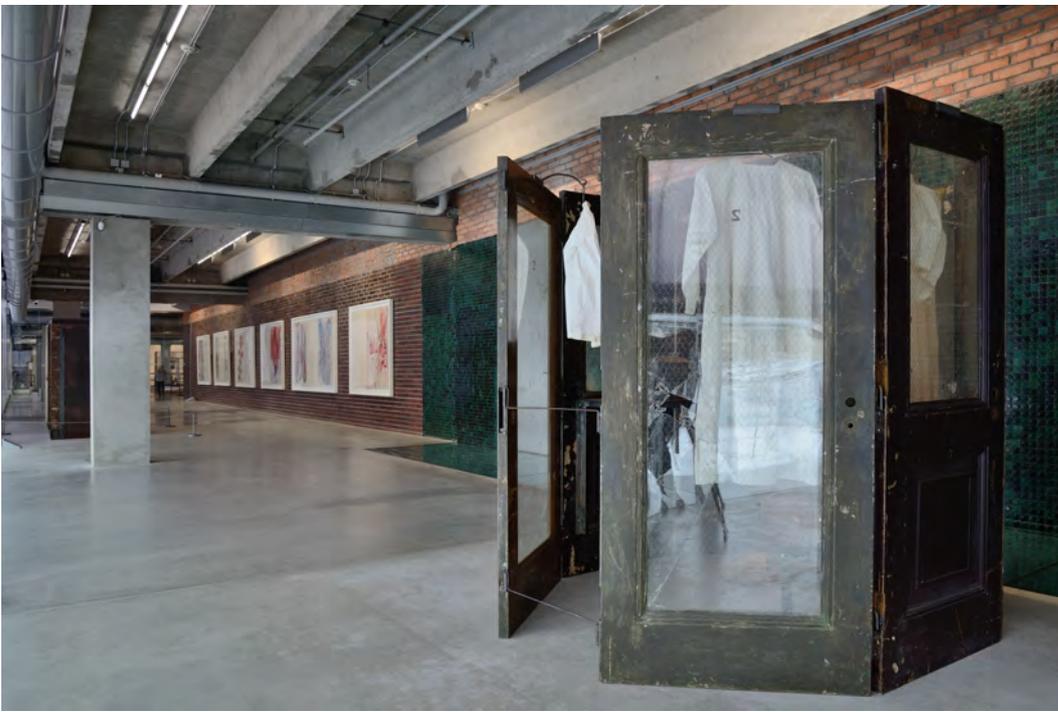
Figure 4. Garage Museum of Contemporary Art. Louise Bourgeois. Structure of Existance. The Cells, Exhibition views, 2016. Photo by Alexey Naroditsky

Tselinny Center of Contemporary Culture. "Beginning" and "Open Archive. Almaty"

Conceived as an announcement of a future cultural center, *Beginning*, a two-month event held in the abandoned former Soviet cinema in Almaty, Kazakhstan, anticipated the museum in its absence, framing it as a process rather than a completed institution[18].

Figure 5. Tselinny Center of Contemporary Culture. Beginning Building Facade, 2018. Photo by Armin Linke

The project questioned the very notion of the museum as a finished space, suggesting that, at times, working with limited means to expose forgotten and hidden elements can produce an image of the present that is both unexpected and more appropriate. The building, constructed in 1964 based on a standard Soviet design, originally featured a vast cinema hall with a panoramic screen and a double-height foyer adorned with a large sgraffito by Yevgeny Sidorkin, a prominent local monumental artist. In the early 2000s, interior renovations fragmented the generous scale of the architecture in order to make it commercially viable: the cinema hall was subdivided into two smaller halls and a nightclub, while the foyer was cut by a heavy mezzanine. The sgraffito was believed to have been destroyed.
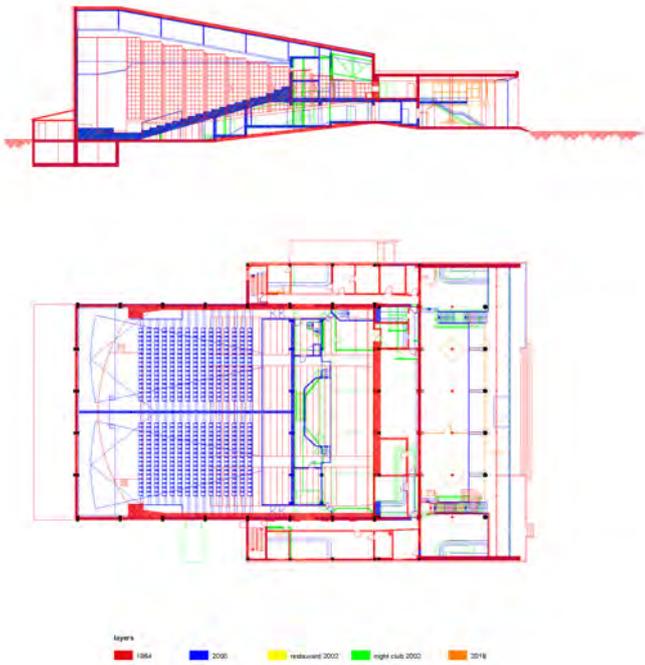
Figure 6. Tselinny Center of Contemporary Culture. Beginning Historic layers of the building, 2018. Copyright Grace

The proposal by GRACE was structured around three programmatic blocks corresponding to the three main parts of the building: an architectural exhibition on Almaty's modernism and a public program in the cinema halls; an exhibition of local artists in the former nightclub, curated by Meruert Kalieva; and the presentation of the building itself in the lobby.
Because the building was awaiting a major future reconstruction—now completed by the British architect Asif Khan[19]—we, as exhibition architects and curators, were permitted to undertake interventions more radical than those typically allowed within exhibition design. Rather than adding new layers, we chose to work through subtraction, removing later architectural additions. This strategy exposed the building's history, revealing both the generosity of the original space and the 'inevitable' violence it had undergone during the post-Soviet period. A simulated archive of Almaty's modernist architecture[20], presented on large inclined panels, cascaded from the steps of the reunified cinema hall, while contemporary Central Asian artists developed subtle, poetic, and ironic works responding to the space of the nightclub.

118

Figure 7. Tselinny Center of Contemporary Culture. Beginning. Open Archive Almaty Exhibition View, 2018. Image rights GRACE

Most poignantly, the accidental rediscovery of the lost Soviet sgraffito beneath later renovations – cut by large steel beams for the support of the mezzanine - became the point at which curatorial intent and preservation converged most clearly.

During its two months of existence, this provisional version of Tselinny Center of Contemporary Culture and its public program generated significant debate on Soviet heritage, post- and decolonial narratives, and the capacity of Kazakhstan's contemporary art scene to critically engage with its own past and present— embodying the idea of the "living museum", introduced by Fernanda Wittgens and later Franco Russoli for Brera.

CONCLUSION

The museum may be read as a space where a provisional awareness of the present is constructed through all-encompassing (total) acts of display. In Boris Groys's terms, museum exhibitions—or installations—stage the precariousness of the present itself, placing the visitor within a critically scrutinized 'here and now'[21]. Not coincidentally, Tselinny, after full

renovation, has embraced exactly these words to describe their institutional agenda and program. "*Here* is about Tselinny's physical space where various formats of events are happening such as art projects, films programme, contemporary theatre, music and other experimental forms. *Now* is based on the research projects that are occurring in the moment and continuously in the future to create an intellectual space enhanced by engagements with artists, theorists and public intellectuals from various disciplinary, cultural, social and ideological perspectives. [...] Tselinny center strives to continue regional cooperation and aims to strengthen the dialogue between the intellectual and artistic communities."[22]

In this sense, the museum operates in close resonance with Giorgio Agamben's understanding of what it means to be contemporary: it creates a space in which the present is held at a critical distance and exposed through its fractures, delays, and unresolved tensions[23].

Preservation follows a similar logic. It is an active process of selection, interpretation, and framing. By choosing which fragments or elements are maintained and which are altered, the architect constructs a contemporary installation through which preserved traces of the past communicate readings that are relevant to the present.

The proximity between curation and preservation therefore emerges as a powerful conceptual and methodological resource for both disciplines. The projects discussed in this essay illustrate how borrowing curatorial tools can address issues of preservation and modernization, as in the Hermitage, while applying preservation logic to exhibition-making, as in Tselinny, can enable complex and critical conversations about contemporary cultural conditions. Russoli's radical example at Brera ultimately dissolves the distinction altogether, treating exhibition, construction, preservation, and institutional self-reflection as manifestations of the same substance.

NOTES

[1] Klonk, Charlotte. 2009. *Spaces of Experience: Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000.* New Haven: Yale University Press.   [2] For reasons of length, this text omits many important stages and chapters in the evolution of museum display, including Alexander Dorner's experiments in Hanover, the radical concepts of revolutionary museums in the Soviet Union, and the postwar work of Willem Sandberg at the Stedelijk Museum, as well as Harald Szeemann's projects in Bern and elsewhere.   [3] O'Doherty, Brian. 1999. *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space.* Berkeley: University of California Press.   [4] Koolhaas, Rem. 2009. *Hermitage 2014.* Paul S. Byard Memorial Lecture, Columbia GSAPP, New York, February 20, 2009. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJJshaEbMYQ]   [5] It is worth noting that over the last three decades, not only have museums been built across different parts of the world, but diverse communities have also moved and migrated globally, often finding spaces for encounter and dialogue within museums. While this essay emphasizes questions of museum architecture and display, it does not ignore the broader and more complex social processes at play.   [6] Maleuvre, Didier. 1999. *Museum Memories: History, Technology, Art.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.   [7] Russoli, Franco. 2016. *Senza utopia non si fa la realtà. Scritti sul museo (1952–1977).* Edited by Erica Bernardi. Milan: Il Saggiatore.   [8] OMA. 2003. *Hermitage Museum.* https://www.oma.com/projects/hermitage-museumOMA. 2014. *Hermitage Masterplan 2014.* https://www.oma.com/lectures/the-hermitage-masterplan-2014   [9] Koolhaas, Rem. 2009. *Hermitage 2014.* Paul S. Byard Memorial Lecture, Columbia GSAPP, New York, February 20, 2009. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJJshaEbMYQ]; 1:03:45   [10] Ibid.   [11] Ibid.   [12] OMA. 2014. Op. Cit.   [13] Koolhaas, Rem. 2011. "Cronocaos." *Log,* no. 21 (Winter): 119–123.   [14] Koolhaas, Rem. 2002. "Junkspace." *October* 100 (Spring): 175–190.   [15] Murakami, Takashi. 2017–2018. *Under the Radiation Falls.* Curated by Ekaterina Inozemtseva. Exhibition design by GRACE. Exhibition, Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow, September 29, 2017–February 4, 2018. https://garagemca.org/en/exhibition/takashi-murakami   [16] Ibid.   [17] Bourgeois, Louise. 2015–2016. *Structures of Existence: The Cells.* Exhibition, organized by Haus der Kunst, Munich, in collaboration with Garage Museum of Contemporary Art. Exhibition design by GRACE. September 25, 2015–February 7, 2016. https://garagemca.org/en/exhibition/louise-bourgeois-structures-of-existence-the-cells.   [18] *Beginning and Open Archive.* Almaty. Exhibition, curated by GRACE and Miruert Kalieva. Exhibition design by GRACE. Tselinny Center of Contemporary Art, Almaty, September–November 2018. https://www.grace.eu/work/beginning-open-archive-almaty/   [19] Who actually turned it into a space, similar to a "white cube".   [20] This section, entitled *Open Archive. Almaty,* was conceived on the basis of research conducted by Anna Bronovitskaya and Nikolay Malinin.   [21] Groys, Boris. 2013. "Entering the Flow: Museum between Archive and Gesamtkunstwerk." *e-flux journal,* no. 44   [22] Tselinny Center of Contemporary Culture, "Mission," n.d., https://www.tselinny.org/en/mission   [23] Agamben, Giorgio. 2009. "What Is an Apparatus?" In *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays,* translated by David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

DANIEL LIBESKIND
OPENING OF MANTOVARCHITETTURA 2025 "ARCHITECTURE AND CONFLICT"

Edited by Sofia Celli (Politecnico di Milano), Elena Fioretto (Politecnico di Milano) and Elena Pozzi (Ministero della Cultura)

GUEST SPEAKER
Daniel Libeskind

DATE
Tuesday, May 6th, 2025

EVENT
MANTOVARCHITETTURA 2025

LOCATION
Sala di Manto, Palazzo Ducale, Mantova

Two dangers constantly threaten the world: order and disorder

Paul Valery

Daniel Libeskind's inaugural lecture at the XII edition of Mantovarchitettura offers a profound reflection on the role of architecture when it engages with history, loss, and civic responsibility. What emerges is not a mere presentation of works, but a cultural stance. Architecture is never neutral, nor simply technical: within a field of ethical and symbolic tensions in which order and disorder, recalling Paul Valéry's well-known formulation, persist as opposing and ever-present dangers. The *Sala dei Giganti* in Mantua offers a powerful metaphor for this condition. Its collapsing classical structures and the violent shattering of supposedly eternal foundations stages a crisis that resonates with contemporary uncertainties. The lightning bolt tearing through the fresco suggests a form of justice suspended in ambiguity, offering no reassuring resolution.

At the centre of Libeskind's reflection stands a crucial proposition: *architecture is not built into the earth. It's built into memory*. Memory, understood not as a nostalgic repository but as an active and generative force, becomes the true ground on which architecture stands. This awareness structures the Jewish Museum in Berlin, conceived as a spatial device that translates the rupture of the Shoah into bodily experience. The central void, the absence of spaces of reconciliation, the descent into the underground, and the deliberate formal discontinuities shape an architecture that refuses symbolic closure. Meaning is not given; it is physically encountered and traversed.

A similar stance informs the Military History Museum in Dresden, where a contemporary wedge interrupts the historical building and inscribes within it the vector of the city's destruction in 1945. Here architecture becomes a public interrogation rather than a narrative solution. No answers are offered, only questions that each visitor must confront: why do people cooperate with war? Why do they obey? Why does violence become normalised?

In the Amsterdam Names Memorial and in the master plan for Ground Zero in New York, memory is woven into the fabric of the everyday city. Names, water, light, reflective surfaces and voids prevent the past from becoming distant. As Libeskind

repeatedly insists, memory does not belong to the past but to the present. It disturbs, interrupts, and resists any form of pacification. At Ground Zero, the decision not to rebuild on the footprints of the Twin Towers, relocating construction to the periphery, affirms an ethical boundary, allowing absence itself to become a form of commemoration. The lecture culminates in Libeskind's reflection on democracy as a vulnerable condition, constantly exposed to erosion, never assured. Democracy, he reminds us, is not a stable achievement but a responsibility that must be continually reaffirmed. In this perspective, architecture becomes an ethical practice: the construction of spaces where memory, reflection, and collective responsibility remain visible, tangible and active in the present. Libeskind's projects suggest that architecture, when grounded in human experience, can act both as witness and catalyst, holding a mirror to the past while opening pathways toward renewed civic and cultural meaning.

THE ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIAN AS WAR CORRESPONDENT

Edited by Renate Karjavcenko (Politecnico di Milano)

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 marked a point of no return in the increasingly tense relationship between the two countries, which had already deteriorated following the outbreak of the conflict in 2014. The most immediate and painful consequences of the war are the casualties on both sides of the frontline; however, its long-term devastation will be most profoundly described by the destruction of the built environment. In February 2025, the Kyiv School of Economics published a report estimating damage to approximately 236000 residential buildings, 1550 healthcare facilities, 4000 educational institutions, and 3900 cultural sites. Beyond the destruction of civilian infrastructure, the deliberate targeting of Ukrainian national identity is evident in UNESCO statistics published in December 2025, which list 268 buildings of historical or artistic significance damaged or completely destroyed since the beginning of the war.

In the middle of such destruction, what is the role of the architects? Should architects remain on the ground to protect heritage, speak out on international platforms, envision post-war reconstruction while cities are still under attack, or urgently document architectural heritage while it is still standing? Many of these questions are raised and addressed in *Being a Ukrainian Architect During Wartime* by Ievgeniia Gubkina, a book that is rather a personal testimony and a political manifesto then conventional scholarly narration of the unfolding events. It assembles, in chronological order, Gubkina's articles, speeches, and interviews produced during the first months of the invasion.

Ievgeniia Gubkina is a Ukrainian architect and architectural and urban historian who was forced into exile following the outbreak of the full-scale war. Her work focuses on twentieth-century Ukrainian architecture and combines scholarly research with curatorial practice and activism. This background, intensified by personal wartime experience, conditioned her to assume the role of an architectural war correspondent, responding to unfolding events while addressing the interests and expectations of an international audience.

Throughout the texts, Gubkina articulates a direct and uncompromising position, framing architecture as "perhaps the most social and one of the most political types of activity" (p. 39). She situates heritage as an active political field rather than a neutral repository of the past. From this perspective, the deliberate targeting of heritage constitutes a political act that contributes to the erasure of collective memory and the mutilation of national identity. "Architecture Is Not Walls, It Is People", the slogan of the multimedia project *Encyclopedia of Ukrainian Architecture* curated by Gubkina in 2020, can also be read as a central argument of this book. The author reconstructs the affective and physical ties between people and heritage during wartime, observing that "people protect heritage, shelter inside it, die inside or at it, document it, grieve for it and strive for its restoration" (p. 127). In this context, heritage does not represent mere relics of the past; rather, its safeguarding becomes an expression of national resistance and a commitment to carry testimonies of collective memory into the future.

In the interviews with Gubkina, the recurring tendency to move quickly from acknowledging ongoing destruction to envisioning post-war reconstruction is evident; often it is accompanied by an eagerness within the professional community to intervene and offer solutions from outside. While she acknowledges that such discussions may help society "heal and grow in the face of the huge trauma we are experiencing" (p. 68) and foster national resilience, she insists that reconstruction entails a profound moral responsibility toward a deeply traumatized society. As she cautions, "if we also contribute to the demolition of that [destroyed] heritage and forget it, or if we use the

wartime destruction to fulfil our own architectural fantasies, that would not be in the public interest" (p. 84). Post-war reconstruction, she argues, will require new modes of administrative decision-making grounded in public participation and solidarity, as well as collaboration among a broad spectrum of professionals - from conservative restorers to visionary planners and architects. International involvement in Gubkina's opinion is welcomed insofar as external actors are willing to work in partnership with Ukrainian society rather than executors of their own ambitions.

Through its divers forms of expression, the book conveys a manifesto of an architect deeply concerned with the unprecedented scale of destruction - not only of the built environment, but of the historical and cultural foundations of the nation to which she belongs. The book may be criticised for its directness, emotional intensity, or limited analytical distance. However, Gubkina addresses such concerns in the introduction, noting that "war leaves no luxury of deliberation, no margin for mistake, no room for multiple rounds of discussion and debate, doubt, and explanation" (p. 8). She further acknowledges that more analytical and reflective work may emerge in the aftermath of the war. For the present moment, however, the reader is offered an emotionally charged testimony - one that speaks not only for a single architect, but for a nation confronting the ongoing violence of war.
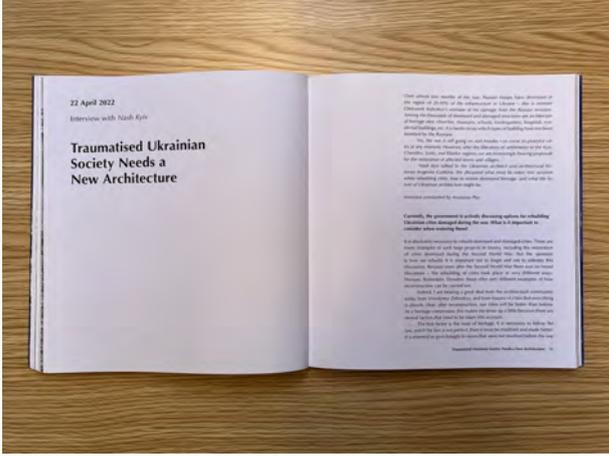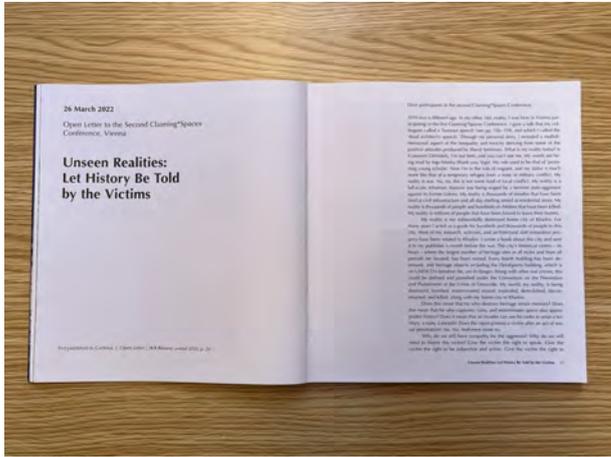
PHOTOS FROM IEVGENIIA GUBKINA, BEING A UKRAINIAN ARCHITECT DURING
WARTIME, 2023

MIGRANT CONFINEMENT CAMPS THE "DETENTION MACHINE" OF 21ST CENTURY EUROPE

Edited by Marta Colombi (Politecnico di Milano)

"There is a *mantra* that runs through the European Union, an unwavering agreement that unites, without exception, the states that compose it. Divided on (almost) everything, they are united on one point: to limit the entry of migrants into the territory of the Union as much as possible, to close and protect the borders" (p. 11, eng. trans.).

This is how *Chiusi Dentro. I campi di confinamento nell'Europa del XXI secolo* (eng. trans.: *Locked In: the Confinement Camps in 21st Century Europe*) opens in Livio Pepino's preface *L'eclissi del diritto* (eng. trans.: *The Eclipse of Rights*), introducing without filters one of the most controversial aspects of contemporary Europe: the systematic construction of confinement spaces for refugees and migrants on the margins of borders or in the heart of the continent. The book analyses the process and methods through which the European Union institutionalises and manages reception and detention facilities, designed to control migration flows and the daily life of individuals, who are progressively deprived of their freedom and reduced to a condition of "non-persons". The title itself expresses a clear critical intent, highlighting the central role of the spatial dimension in the contemporary conflict between Europe and migration.

The book is divided into two sections. The first provides an overview of confinement camps and how access to Europe is managed, while the second analyses the countries most affected by migration and the policies promoted by the European Union for the construction of control structures. In particular, the contributions in the first section examine the political, legal, administrative and organisational mechanisms that make possible the increasingly consolidated phenomenon of the institutionalisation of the "camp system". Through references to European codes, pacts and regulations, as well as to the international organisations involved - including the two United Nations agencies IOM and UNHCR, and Frontex - the book reveals a shared strategy aimed at governing migrant mobility within and outside European territories through a complex system of detention, identification and reception. In particular, Gianfranco Schiavone's contribution, *Il sistema dei campi di confinamento* (eng. trans.: *The System of Confinement Camps*), identifying the morphological characteristics of the camps, offers a detailed description of their architectural and spatial design, demonstrating how architecture is actively involved in the contemporary policies of confinement of migrants and refugees. As described by the author himself, the camp has a very specific architectural form, characterised by a "semi-detention nature" determined mainly by three factors: the isolation of the location in which the camp is built, the social segregation from the outside world, and the rigid organisation of the daily life of the confined individuals. In almost all cases, the camps are located in isolated, inaccessible areas, surrounded by walls, multiple boundary fences and permanently guarded entry points that limit freedom of movement and the possibility of contact with the outside (p. 44).

The second section, *Campi, Paesi, Confinamento* (eng. trans.: *Camps, Countries, Confinement*), examines a series of emblematic country-cases. The analysis encompasses both European Union member states - Greece, Italy, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia - and non-EU countries - Turkey, North Macedonia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina - as well as the border area between Belarus and Poland. Particular attention

is paid to the role of non-EU countries which act as filter countries along the main migration routes: through European funding and specific agreements between states - such as the 2016 EU-Turkey agreement - these countries have built camps and detention facilities aimed at "externalising" borders and "alleviating" migratory pressure in Europe.

The book is published by Rivolti ai Balcani, a network that has been active since 2019 in promoting research on what is happening along European borders and on the conditions of migrants in transit, particularly along the Balkan route. *Chiusi Dentro. I campi di confinamento nell'Europa del XXI secolo* (eng. trans.: *Locked In: the Confinement Camps in 21st Century Europe*) is an important result of this research: in just a few pages and through an interdisciplinary approach that integrates economics, finance, politics, sociology, ethics and architecture, the book summarises the complexity of the migration phenomenon. In line with the book, the multimedia project *Chiusi Dentro. Dall'alto* (eng. trans.: *Locked In. From Above*), produced in collaboration with Altraeconomia and PlaceMarks, shows the territorial impact of detention camps and their layout through satellite photographs and maps, stimulating critical reflection on the role of architecture in the shaping of contemporary spaces of exclusion.

The researches demonstrate Europe's tendency to implement generalised policies of hostility towards the migrant population, aimed at creating invisible and remote "non-places", governed by prohibitions and characterised by control and rejection. In this scenario, architecture acts as a device of power that generates a separation between "inside" and "outside", revealing an uninterrupted logic of segregation of the "other" in structure with a "concentrationary nature". Thus, in the contemporary conflict between Europe and migration, architecture becomes a key "element of erosion" of fundamental human rights. By recalling Article 13 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, according to which "Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each State" (p. 137), and referring to the reflections of sociologist Federico Rahola, the book reaches a critical and explicit conclusion: migrant confinement camps are the "detention machine" of 21st century Europe (p. 39).
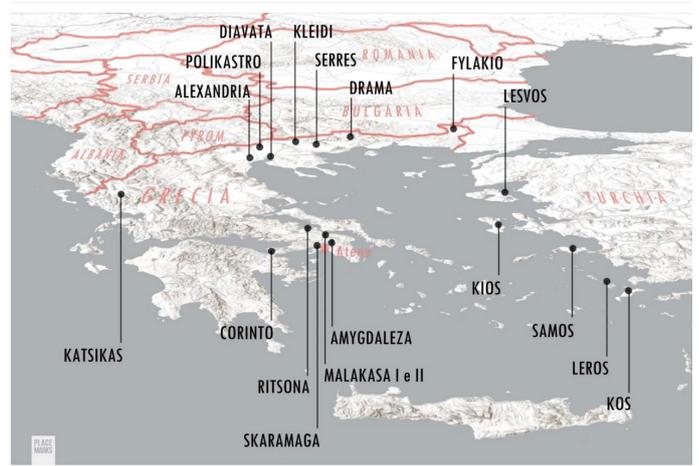
PHOTOS OF "CHIUSI DENTRO. I CAMPI DI CONFINAMENTO NELL'EUROPA DEL XXI SECOLO" EDITED BY RIVOLTI AI BALCANI

131

Greece

The Katsikas camp in a shot taken in 2022. After emerging as an agglomeration of scattered tents and containers in 2015-2016, the first core with prefabricated structures arose in 2018, followed by a second core with in-line structures. Prefabricated concrete walls surround it and the structure is semicarceral

PHOTOS OF THE WEBSITE "CHIUSI DENTRO. DALL'ALTO" BY RIVOLTI AI BALCANI, ALTRAECONOMIA AND PLACEMARKS