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Bricks and mortar of reconciliation

Designing peace

Architecture has long served the powerful and prosperous. But it is in a unique position to help reconstruct post-conflict societies by building stability and uniting divided cities.

A great deal of (re)construction takes place in the aftermath of war. Can this be done in such a way that it creates more peaceful relations among inhabitants in the future? Is an ‘architecture of peace’ possible? This was the central question at a conference of architects and social scientists at the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi) in May 2010.

The physical environment influences social relations. Chairs in a room arranged in a circle will generate a different discussion than if they were arranged in rows. More street light makes people feel more secure. People hardly get to know each other in large apartment blocks and remain anonymous. Public space is needed for people to intermingle, just as offices need coffee corners and copy machines for people to meet and interact. So the question is not whether architecture and city planning influence social behaviour, but how and to what extent. How much influence can architecture and city planning exert towards shaping a society torn apart by conflicts or just emerging from large-scale violence?

Post-conflict situations are even more complex than situations following an earthquake or a tsunami. Natural disasters tend to unite people (though different groups tend to be affected differently). Societies that have just experienced large-scale violence, however, remain deeply divided, even after the shooting has stopped. Every step of reconstruction is evaluated, whether it favours one side or another. Security problems abound. Weapons are everywhere, and a culture of violence persists.

The most mobile and educated will have left the country. Money is only in the hands of those who profited from the war situation (by smuggling, looting, running protection rackets and human trafficking). Warring factions contest the leadership. Civic institutions cease to function. Popular participation in decision making suffers from mutual hatred.

By **Gerd Junne**, professor of international relations at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

summary

- The physical environment influences social behaviour. It stands to reason that architecture can help shape societies emerging from conflict.
- Historically, architecture has always served the victorious and the powerful. But it can be used to create a stable physical environment, which in turn would promote social stability.
- To achieve this goal, architects must stop regarding peace as only a favourable condition for architecture, and rather see peace as a condition that can be designed.
- Architects are in a position to reunite divided cities. By removing physical barriers they can also remove barriers in the minds of the inhabitants.

In addition, decision makers are under severe pressure to introduce immediate improvements. Failure to do this could cause the country to relapse into war. This happens within five years in about half of all violent civil conflicts. Any ‘post-war’ situation may easily turn into a ‘pre-war’ situation. The question is to what extent can architecture, in the broad sense of the term (including city planners), contribute to reducing the chance of violent intra-state conflict?

To utopia and back again

Most remnants of historical constructions are either relics of an ‘architecture of war’ (fortresses, city walls, watch towers), *Herrschaftsarchitektur* (power architecture), ruling-class architecture (palaces, castles, courts) or religious buildings. They were built to impress, subdue, enforce, intimidate and defend. Historically, architecture has always served the victorious and the powerful. The question of whether architecture can also serve another purpose has only been asked recently. Why can’t architecture contribute to emancipation? Why can’t it be used to uplift people, to empower them, to contribute to equality and facilitate peaceful interaction?

This question was first seriously considered following World War I, when architects became ardent proponents of



REUTERS / K. Halder

modernism. They were convinced that a new, classless society could be built on the foundation of rationally designed constructions that provide space for living, studying and recreation for everyone. The interest was short-lived. It quickly gave way to a new wave of ‘imperialist’ architecture, which also took root under fascism and communism. But the interest revived after World War II, especially in cities with a social-democrat leaning, and intensified with the cultural revolution of the 1960s.

But when the general belief in a ‘manageable’ world faltered in the 1970s and 1980s, so did the confidence of architects that they could re-engineer the world. It gave way to aestheticism or functionalism – until some architects realized that their profession might well have thrown the baby out with the bathwater. Though the idea of architects creating a new world by designing better buildings (and towns) was utopian, this did not mean that they had no influence at all. The devastation in many war-torn countries in the 1990s in particular stimulated a new way of thinking about how architects could contribute to conflict prevention or the healing of ‘wounded cities’.

Role of architects

One of the first institutions to take up this challenge and put the contribution of architects into a broader political, economic and social context was the Post-war Reconstruction and Development Unit (PRDU) of the University of York, United Kingdom, founded by Sultan Barakat in 1993. One of his first students at PRDU, Esther Charlesworth, followed his lead and started Architects Without Frontiers in 1999. However, architects actually play

only a marginal role in post-conflict development. Most of them only regard peace as a favourable condition for architecture, not as a condition which itself can be designed. Given their specific competences, they could be playing a more meaningful role in the following areas:

1. Architecture is about the organization of space. Architects can assist by designing spatial arrangements that are more conducive to stability and peace.
2. Architects focus on the future. They build for future use. Conflicting parties are often prisoners of their past. They blame each other for past atrocities. Architects can turn their attention from what has been to what should be.
3. Architects are trained to give human needs – such as shelter, protection, comfort, rest, interaction – more weight than ideologies and beliefs.
4. Architects work in an interdisciplinary way, and it is their daily task to mediate between different stakeholders (owners, users, neighbours, authorities, customers, visitors) and find compromises in the face of different exigencies.
5. Architects have a natural sense of sequence: the second floor cannot be built before the first. This ability can also help to formulate post-conflict development strategies.
6. Architects are used to complexity and trained to understand the interaction between a building’s different components, materials and types of use (systemic thinking).
7. Architects want to build something solid and lasting – something that lasts for at least a while. They aim for stability, which is highly desirable in a post-conflict situation.



Preventing uricide

One of the major concerns of architects, in addition to human suffering, is the conservation of cultural heritage that has been threatened or destroyed during war. Attempts at ethnic cleansing do not only aim to chase away other ethnic groups, but also to eliminate all artefacts symbolizing a group's roots in a given territory. It is routine during conflict for one group to consciously target sites that are historically significant for another group. This basically comes down to eradicating another group's cultural monuments.

Destruction, however, often goes further. It is not only the monuments of the 'other' that are targeted. Cities as centres of urban life are hit too. Many conflicts around the world have a background of conflict between urban civilizations and their rural environment, one that has played itself out from Cambodia to Bosnia, and from Iran to Sierra Leone. In his essay *Urbicide and Chances for the Reconstruction of Balkan Cities*, Milan Prodanovic argues that cities symbolize 'the coexistence of a variety of interrelated ethnic and cultural groups'. He points out that the former mayor of Belgrade used the term uricide to describe attempts to virtually and symbolically 'murder' cities, resulting from 'archetypal feelings of hostility on the part of rural society toward the rise of cities'.

One of the victims of uricide was Mostar. It also provided a famous example of the high priority given to the restoration of a historical site, namely the restoration of the old Ottoman bridge across the Neretva River. This bridge connected two sides of the town, inhabited by Muslims and Croats respectively. For foreigners, the bridge became a symbol for reuniting the fighting groups. But when it was finally rebuilt, hardly any of Mostar's inhabitants used it.

Divided cities

Uniting divided cities has been a great challenge for architects, from Belfast to Nicosia, regardless of whether these cities have been divided by walls or by barriers in the minds of their inhabitants. The longer the division continues, the more the different communities arrange their life around it. The border areas that could function as meeting grounds for people to interact with each other become a peripheral wasteland for both sides. Architects and city planners could do a great job in such situations to revive these border territories – as long as the political situation allows it. But they do not have to wait for this to happen. Attractive plans for these areas might generate the political will to realize such plans.

These mental borderlines in the minds of people are difficult to bridge by architecture. They can try to assist in overcoming these mental barriers by constructing buildings with high symbolic value. But rebuilding after a civil war (or after a revolution, like the end of the apartheid regime in South Africa in 1994) often does not only aim to restore destroyed sites. It intends to build something new on the ruins of the old regime to symbolize the change that has taken place.

A building in South Africa that symbolizes the fundamental break with the former era is the new

constitutional court in Johannesburg, built on top of what used to be the country's famous prison where many of those who fought the apartheid system had been incarcerated. As a gesture, it is perfect. But unfortunately it does not directly affect the relationship between different groups in South Africa.

Another famous building that has been restored is the Reichstag, the seat of the German parliament in Berlin. It was once set on fire by the Nazi regime and heavily damaged during World War II. It was given a big glass dome on top of the rebuilt building, symbolizing the architect's desire for transparency in politics. It is a fabulous construction, but critics point out that the ability to look inside a construction will probably not increase people's 'insight' of it.

There was heated discussion in New York City about what should replace the Twin Towers destroyed in the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Suggestions to build a constitutional court, a parliament or a replacement for the Twin Towers are intended to symbolize unity, justice, transparency and resilience. But it is not yet clear what their direct impact will be for people who use it (or do not use it) or live in the neighbourhood. The buildings clearly have a message, but it is not clear who this message is intended for, nor what they are going to do with it.

The work on divided cities is not only extremely interesting for those cities that experienced a dramatic split or had high walls erected between different boroughs. 'What happened here could happen anywhere else,' according to a Beirut resident's wartime memoir referred to in Jon Calame and Esther Charlesworth's 2009 book *Divided Cities: Belfast, Beirut, Jerusalem, Mostar, and Nicosia*. More and more cities have taken on a multicultural character. If no preventive measures are taken, initial tensions could escalate to such an extent that the list of divided cities becomes much longer. Actually, cities could be the arena for much violent conflict in the 21st century.

Turbo-urbanization

Not all post-conflict cities are clearly divided along ethnic lines yet. But practically all have to cope with a dramatic rise in the population, which often doubles or even triples within a year. The reasons behind this population increase are insecurity in rural areas, dangerous agriculture (landmines), better access to basic public services and better (even if still slim) employment prospects.

Measures taken by foreign countries also contribute to sudden and sharp population rises in cities. When the war in Kosovo ended, for example, Germany sent 96,000 refugees from Kosovo back to the country, 11,000 of which were forcibly deported. Many of them cannot or dare not go back to their original homes (which may be devastated, occupied by others, situated in an unsafe environment or have few employment opportunities). So they stay in the capital – or on the fringe of the capital.

Post-conflict cities go through the same problems as expanding cities, only at the speed of a bullet train. The sudden acceleration of activity leads to a multitude of



In 1993, the famous bridge of Mostar in Bosnia was destroyed during fierce fighting between Croats and Muslims. After the war the town was divided, but the bridge was restored and reopened in 2004.

spontaneous building activities. This creates heated conflict about land rights, which poses tremendous challenges for the planning of infrastructure and basic services. Public authorities are in no way able to channel these activities according to any demonstrable plan.

Planning authorities are often decimated in such situations. Their offices, which may have employed 40 or 50 civil servants prior to a conflict, may only have a handful left following the conflict. Sultan Barakat pointed out in his presentation at the NAI conference that, ironically, local capacity is at its lowest when the willingness of the international community to provide means for reconstruction is at its highest, in the immediate aftermath of large-scale violence.

Urban authorities also struggle to (re-)establish themselves. They not only compete with private parties and market forces, but also face rival agendas from provincial or national authorities, and from the military, police or militias, all of whom view cities from a different vantage point. This competition is not only a question of a legal division of tasks and responsibilities. It is also an economic issue, given that the authority that issues permits for construction is an important source of legal and illegal income.

Perfect slums

Even under 'normal' circumstances, construction cannot keep pace with a sudden population rise of such proportions. The city of Kabul, for example, in spite of its large-scale destruction, saw its population triple, with half of it now living in provisional settlements or slums. In Iraq, about 2.9 million people (or 17% of the population) lived in slums in 2000. In 2010, their number had increased to 10 million.

City planners face immense challenges. Top-down planning only leads to additional conflict. The self-organizing capacity of slum dwellers is often underestimated. In many cases, it is probably better to provide inhabitants with the means to upgrade their quarters themselves. This would enable them to create neighbourhoods with a higher quality

of life, without it leading to rent increases that would force many inhabitants to leave and create new provisional settlements elsewhere.

Many interventions have been planned to better integrate slum or favela communities into their surrounding neighbourhoods. But the real challenge is to find jobs and income for the slum dwellers, which would provide them with the means to improve their houses and stay there when prices rise.

Valley of thieves

Not all cities in conflict zones suffer from conflict. Some cities thrive. A good example is Goma at the border between the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda. In Goma, the rising trade and smuggling of minerals during the wars turned the city into a vibrant regional centre. It became a boom town, but its newly acquired status also gave rise to new land conflicts.

In other cities, it may not be the whole city that profits from the war situation. It may just be one area inhabited by war profiteers. The privatized coast along the Danube in Novi Sad, Serbia's second largest city (which saw its population double after the war), is called the 'valley of thieves' by the local population. If there is little improvement in other parts of cities, such tangible inequalities may just lay the ground for another round of conflict in the future. ■

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