

THE URBAN MILIEU AND ITS SLAYING

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Exposed to everything from earthquakes, floods, fires to smart bombs, cities are among the most durable artifacts. Not understood as ephemeral, buildings are meant to outlive life itself, making its destruction per se a shocking spectacle of violence. However, a deliberated and planned destruction of the city offers a new form of political violence. Urbicide then emerges as a pondered and aimed killing of the city, and of its built environment.

As spaces of affect, the buildings that constitute the urban landscape are charged with symbolic and ideological meanings, and, subsequently, their destruction does have an impact of great proportion, which goes beyond the elimination of physical infrastructures. So what are these consequences? What is the importance of the built environment?

I – THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

As with any being, man incorporates, strives, and lives within an environment, a milieu that supports their existence. How do we as dwellers within a specific built environment make sense of it?

Rapoport considers that individuals answer to environments according to the meanings that those environments have for them, the impact they exert on them. Accordingly he affirms “environmental evaluation, then, is more a matter of overall affective response than of a detailed analysis of specific aspects, it is more a matter of latent than of manifest function, and it is largely affected by images and ideals” (Rapoport, 1982: 13). Material objects produce affective responses, establishing a background for further images and thoughts, dictating, subsequently, the way future interactions take place in the environment that houses the material. The physical and emotional gain a new configuration in which they are conjoined, consequently one can say that the milieu and those who habitat in it are intimately linked, they should be thought as a unit of survival (Ballantyne, 2007).

Additionally, the built environment, the buildings that compose it, are utterly social and cultural products, constructed in accordance to the social needs and to accommodate a wide variety of functions. Acknowledging this Harvey states:



“The problem of the proper conceptualization of space is resolved through human practice with respect to it. In other words, there are philosophical answers to philosophical questions that arise over the nature of space – the answers lie in human practice. The question ‘what is space?’ is therefore replaced by the question ‘how is it that different human practices create and make use of different conceptualizations of space?’ (2006: 125-126).

Therefore their size, location and design are governed and, subsequently, embody reflections of society’s beliefs in a given moment. Accordingly, as the society finds new ways of social and economic organization, resource distribution, values and ideas, so too do these changes occur in the built environment. Thereby, society produces its built environment, and its built environment supports its society (King, 1984; King, 2004). Understanding this Churchill stated: “We shape our dwellings, and afterwards our dwellings shape us” (1944).¹ As a result, the built environment can be understood as an intricate and complex space of affective responses and interactions.

Considering the importance of the built environment and the impossible dissociation between the same and the human being, Heidegger offers an interesting point of view that correlates the notions of building and dwelling. He suggests that the manner, in which we dwell, is the manner in which we exist in this world. It is within shared spaces, and the buildings that constitute these spaces that one dwells. Consequently problems of dwelling are indeed problems of building, and vice-versa, and further on problems of existence. As a result building is not interpreted only as means to provide shelter and housing, but as part of the community that it endows, allowing this community to forge a sense of present, while offering and representing the historical past and perspectives of future. It enables to create a sense of place in which dwelling occurs, in consequence one can say that the relation between man and space takes on the form of dwelling (Heidegger, 1971).

With more than half of the world’s population living and working within cities, the urban milieu has become a site of complex conversations, and an expression of different heterogeneities. It has then becomes a site where heterogeneities are composed in accordance to the dialogues expressed in spaces of dwelling. Corroborating with the above mentioned, Amin and Thrift explain that ‘cities hum with talk which is based on shared conversational contexts in which categories and identities are constantly articulated’ (quoted in Shapiro, 2010: 12). Therefore, Anthony King understood architecture as a key material and visual realm where different discourses take place, where the

¹ This statement took place during the process of reconstruction of the House of Commons, which happen as consequence of the bombings of London in World War II.

competition between them takes place. Moreover, cities are complex and multidimensional spaces, where local power politics will take place in order to control these same conversations.

Consequently, Foucault considered that “a whole history remains to be written of spaces which would at the same time be the history of powers” (1980: 149). As a result skylines can be considered symbolic representations of power successions. Consequently the acts of building and rebuilding have become an attempt to control different meanings, in a certain period of time. On the other hand, the destruction of the built environment can also be seen as an exercise of power, and above all a distinctive form of political violence.

II – SLAYING THE URBAN MILIEU

The perceived importance of the built environment as a considered shared spatiality and a condition of possibility of heterogeneous communities and, simultaneously, the symbolism of certain powers, transformed the urban environment in the perfect landscape of violence. Consequently, the imagination of the urban milieu as a space of order and security, an engrained trope of Western urbanism, tramples. From an axiom of civilization to a place of vitality, heterogeneity and mobilization, the city emerges as a preferred site of violence (Hersher, 2006).

Accordingly, the violence and terror illustrated in both post-Cold War and post 9/11 periods, comprise a systematic and strategic targeting of the city and dwelling spaces. Wars are fought not in trenches but within dwelling spaces, such as schools and supermarkets, offices and houses, as a result the open field is abandoned and war makes a grand entrance into urban spaces (Barakat, 1998).

Though widespread attention may have been paid to the destruction of iconic buildings of the urban landscape, the analysis of this violence as considered and widespread destruction of buildings still represents a lack in the present literature on political violence.

A violence that intentionally was designed to ‘kill’ cities, that is intrinsically connected to a certain degree of dehumanization of urban dwellers while deliberately attempting to punish them. Moreover, the concept of urbicide emerges to describe this form of political violence. Additionally, Stephen Graham explains

‘Urbicide can involve the ethno-nationalist targeting of spaces of cosmopolitan mixing (as in the Balkans in the 1990s); the systematic devastation of the means of living a modern urban life (as with the de-electrification of Iraq in 1991, the seize of Gaza in



2006-2008, or the attack on Lebanon in 2006); or the direct erasure of demonized people and places declared to be unmodern, barbarian, unclean, pathological, or sub-human (As with Robert Mugabe's bulldozing of hundreds of thousands of shanty dwellings on the edge of Harare in 2005)' (2011: 84).

Endorsing urbicide as a strategy is not about fighting an enemy, but about producing a spectacle of terror, death and ruin, which utterly yells a praised brutality. The city becomes a necropolis, 'place of annihilation'; a symbol of the extermination of lived geographies (Hewitt, 1983).

Though as with any other form of political violence, urbicide does not occur in a singular form, as usual one form of violence preludes others. Moreover, it coexists with other forms of violence, such as genocide or state-sponsored repression (Shaw, 2004).

Exploring the relationship between urbicide and genocide Martin Shaw affirms that it isn't of use to separate urbicide from genocide, as urbicide is a form of genocide (2004), once both in genesis constitute a disavowal of heterogeneity, that is deeply entrenched in dialectics of dehumanization and demonization of others. Accordingly, "war mobilizes the highly charged and dangerous dialectic of space attachment" involving the "perceived antithesis of 'our' places or homeland and 'theirs', an unbridled sentimentalizing of one's own while dehumanizing the enemy's people and land" (Hewitt, 1983: 258).

The destruction of Stari Most has been perpetuated as an iconic moment in the 1992-95 Bosnian War, but also a recurrent study case when researching urban destruction. Of great significance, the collapse of the Old Bridge into the River Neretva, put an end to the plural entity and ethnic mixed character of Mostar, by instituting a physical division between the left and right banks. Subsequently, this same division allowed a misconstrued perception of two different and homogenous communities, as well as the existence of ethnic distinctiveness from the Bosnian Muslims/Bosniacs. The bridge that once constituted a place of dwelling and plural conversations, a place of connection, submerged and its destruction has endowed and justified dialectics of demonization, by offering a visual separation of the two ethnic communities (Coward, 2009).

Additionally, as other examples that confirm to understand the destructive capabilities of targeting the built environment, Israeli government endorsed a bulldozing policy that aims the destruction of the Palestinian landscape. Furthermore, by destroying the urban, and its infrastructural foundations, Israel has denied the Palestinian people the cultural and collective rights to the modern city. In a very open discourse about the employment of urbicide as a war strategy, Sharon stated in 2001:

“I know the Arabs. They are not impressed by helicopters and missiles. For them, there is nothing more important than their house. So, under me you will not see a child shot next to his father. It is better to level the entire village with bulldozers, row after row” (quoted in Graham, 2004).

Proving to recognize the emotional reason and symbolism of physical infrastructures, while promoting a squandering of the civilizational capital uricide as a war strategy has, in both examples, given evidence of its effectiveness while complementing other forms of violence.

However, even though the study uricide is mainly focused in war contexts, others argued that natural disasters and even urban planning could constitute examples of uricide (see Herscher, 2006). Though not explored here, uricide in general requires a more detailed analysis by academics.

The destruction, the building and rebuilding the built environment has regularly been tied with attempts to control and manipulate meanings. However, deeply embedded in disputed politics of local power struggles and global interconnections, rare are the cases when cities don't rise again. Kipling's famous poem “Cities and Thrones and Powers”, captures indeed the message above.

“CITIES and Thrones and Powers
Stand in Time's eye,
Almost as long as flowers,
Which daily die:
But, as new buds put forth
To glad new men,
Out of the spent and unconsidered Earth,
The Cities rise again” (1989)

Therefore, we shall also bare in mind that there is no politics of destruction that does not envision politics of reconstruction, and that these are deeply embedded in politics of exclusion that endowed politics of disposable lives, offering a different type of politics of violence (see Vale and Campanella, 2005; Giroux, 2006; Giroux, 2008).

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