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Barbarians through the gate

Maria Tumarkin

Book review: The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War by Robert Bevan, published by Routledge, 2006.

The past century has seen sustained campaigns of architectural carnage as combatants have engaged in the phenomenon of cultural cleansing, says Maria Tumarkin.

SOME OF THE MOST stirring and provocative statements about our culture can be found in memorial design competitions. New York's Ground Zero, Madrid's March 11 bombings, Holocaust and AIDS memorials - look not at the winning entries, but at the ones that did not make the cut.

Horst Hoheisel's design for Berlin's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, for instance. Here it is in black and white - blow up Berlin's Brandenburg Gate, grind its rubble into dust, then spread the dust over the memorial site nearby.

This is, of course, the same Brandenburg Gate that has been, over the past two centuries, one of Berlin's most famous and treasured structures. A landmark of rare historical density, it had seen it all - Napoleon, Hitler, JFK, Cold War, reunification, the works.

Hoheisel's proposal was doomed from the start. At least partially, this was the point. The way of stomping out even the possibility of, what the artist termed, "final solution" to Germany's memorial problem. After all, Hoheisel was taking on some of the cornerstones of the self-proclaimed civilised world, which had only recently seemed rock-solid. We do not blow up cultural treasures. We do not make memorials out of other memorials, destroyed and ground into pulp. Commemoration is about healing and redemption. We are not the barbarians.

In a sense, Robert Bevan's *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War* is a meticulously researched gentleman's version of Hoheisel's vision. Where Hoheisel's intention is to rattle and provoke, Bevan sets out to educate his readers about the extent to which places of worship, history, culture and daily life have been routinely reduced to dust all across the world. And not by accident, either.

In the past century in particular, Bevan writes in the book's introduction, nothing short of a war has been waged on architecture - "the destruction of the cultural artefacts of an enemy people or nation as a means of dominating, terrorising, dividing or eradicating it altogether".

Architecture as the target, not the collateral damage.

During World War II, Germany and Britain engaged in sustained campaigns of architectural carnage. In 1942, the historic German ports of Lubeck and Rostock were virtually destroyed by British bombing raids. "British barbarians" ran one of the headlines in the German media. Furious, Hitler ordered the bombings of historic British cities - Exeter, Bath and, some weeks later, Canterbury.

"Like the English," wrote Goebbels in his diary, "we must attack centres of culture." Quid pro quo. Germans destroyed Coventry's historical 14th-century cathedral; British - Dresden's world-renowned Frauenkirche. And on it went. Two of the world's cultural giants matching each other's capacity for violence, landmark by landmark, cathedral by cathedral.

World War II is often cited when it comes to architectural slaughters, but *The Destruction of Memory* goes well beyond the predictable. The book's scope is wide-ranging, sometimes dizzyingly so.

In the first chapter only, Bevan brings together the former Yugoslavia, the Holocaust and the Armenian genocide of 1915 to make a powerful case for the phenomenon of cultural cleansing - the destruction of people, their collective memory and identity with architecture as its medium.

All across former Yugoslavia, mosques, synagogues, cathedrals, libraries, museums and whole cities were destroyed not because they were in the line of fire but because of their remarkable capacity to embody one's enemy's past, transmit his legacy, legitimate his present and future.

Throughout the book, Bevan comes back to the notion of cultural cleansing with a piercing sensitivity and a sense of acute foreboding. He knows and he wants us to know that it starts with architecture, but it almost invariably ends with people.

In November 1938, in the space of 24 hours, 267 synagogues as well as countless Jewish homes and businesses were attacked all across Germany; 75,000 Jewish shop windows were shattered. Kristallnacht was a warning. We've seen many warnings like that - in China, Bosnia, Afghanistan.

The preamble of desecration. Mosques turned into toilets in Chechnya and India. Churches turned into granaries or shooting ranges in Turkey and Russia. Afghanistan's Bamiyan Buddhas, the tallest standing Buddhas in the world, blown up by the Taliban. It was Bamiyan men who were forced at gunpoint to set the explosives off at their sacred structure, just as, six decades earlier, Jews were forced to desecrate their synagogues. Barbarians are smart like that.

Bevan is not just concerned with the destruction of religious and cultural landmarks. The war on architecture is often the war on cities. *The Destruction of Memory* deals at length with the phenomenon of urbicide - a purposeful and systematic murder of a city.

Here is Pol Pot's murderous de-urbanisation of Cambodia, with people and their cities ripped apart from each other. Here is Ceausescu's regime's meticulous, scientific destruction of Bucharest's architectural past in the 1970s and 1980s. Here are Kabul and Sarajevo annihilated point-blank.

Cities are notoriously difficult to tame - ethnically and ideological heterogeneous, instinctively antagonistic to power, constantly changing. As such, they can inspire hatred.

The intensity of emotions aroused by architecture is truly remarkable. In Madrid during the Spanish Civil War, Bevan tells us, a statue of Jesus was executed by firing squad.

Robert Bevan is an architectural journalist and his love for his subject matter is palpable all through the book. Inevitably, he questioned himself. With millions of people slaughtered in the course of the 20th century, was his obsessive concern for the fate of architecture a reflection of warped priorities?

Bevan was cured by what happened in the former Yugoslavia. It was then that he realised that in wars, genocides, ethnic cleansings and partitions, the purposeful destruction of people and their built environment went hand in hand. To care for people was also to ache for their built legacy.

At one point in the book, Bevan quotes Croatian writer Slavenka Drakulic, who is reflecting on the fate of Mostar's 16th-century Ottoman bridge, a UNESCO World Heritage site and one of the most important Bosnian cultural landmarks, destroyed in 1993.

Why, Drakulic asks, can we feel more pain by looking at the image of the destroyed bridge than at the faces of murdered people?

Maybe it is because we expect people to die, but monuments of civilisation were built to outlive us, to last centuries. Maybe this is why the war on architecture is the kind of barbarity that is most difficult to stomach.

"A dead woman is one of us," Drakulic writes, "but the bridge is all of us forever."

Maria Tumarkin's *Traumascapes. The Power and Fate of Places Transformed by Tragedies* is published by Melbourne University Publishing.