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Infrastructure may crumble, but the people won’t

Maria Tumarkin

LONDON has been under attack before. The 57 consecutive days and nights of intense, unrelenting air bombing in the 1940 Blitz. The three decades or so of IRA terrorist attacks, which made most Londoners familiar with security scares and emergency evacuations. Like these events, last week's bombings targeted not only the inhabitants of London but the city itself.

What was under attack was not just the transport infrastructure, but the way in which people felt and thought about their city, how they walked its streets, their mental maps and everyday routes to school, work and shops.

The profound and the banal, everything got affected. Russell Square, for instance, will no longer be remembered just as a benign tourist location -- the place where Charles Dickens lived in the 19th century. Now it is also a site of a bus explosion, a place of terrible trauma and death.

In the past few years, terrorist attacks have redefined the way we inhabit and relate to places in our lives. Baghdad, New York, Moscow, Madrid, Jerusalem, and now London -- the urban fabric of countless cities across the world has been transformed by these attacks. After all, this is what happens in war. And we are in the middle of the war, no two ways about it.

In World War II, cities themselves emerged as primary targets and casualties of the fighting. Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Berlin, Dresden, Stalingrad, Warsaw -- between 1940 and 1945, these and many other places were consigned to the dustbin of history and, God knows, came very close to destruction.

Only 60 years ago, they were wastelands, death-traps, sites of the end of the world. But as we know, they survived. Rubble was used to pave the roads, trees were planted, babies were born.

Hiroshima became the focus of a trans-national tourist pilgrimage. Berlin is one of the most vibrant European capitals.

Warsaw is undergoing a significant cultural renaissance, tagged in the media "the next Prague" or "the next Paris".

"Cities don't die," wrote Sarajevan author Aleksandar Hemon, "unless they are completely levelled. But even the levelled ones still exist, like Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Villages vanish and suburbs vanish -- not enough of them! But cities don't die."

Hemon's city, Sarajevo, is perhaps the most poignant example of the endurance of our cities and their ability to withstand devastation and havoc. Between 1992 and 1996, for 1395 days, Sarajevo, the multi-ethnic capital of
the newly independent Bosnia-Herzegovina was under siege -- the longest and the most brutal in modern history.

No military purpose was served by the blockade of the city by Bosnian Serb forces.

The systematic destruction of Sarajevo's spirit and urban fabric was called an act of urbicide -- a cold-blooded murder of the city. Yet Sarajevo survived, because of the bond between the city and its people.

Those people, who refused to leave, who got married and had babies in the midst of the siege and the shelling, who believed that their lives and their survival were inextricably linked to the survival of their city.

The new generation of trauma sites across the world should give us a renewed respect for the profound bond we share with places we inhabit. Both our past and our present tell us that the importance of this bond is heightened not undermined in the aftermath of tragedies.

In Sarajevo, Madrid, Berlin, New York and now London, the city and its traumatised population have come together, not fallen apart during and after the acts of violence and destruction.

Closer to home, it was only in 1974 that the city of Darwin was devastated by Cyclone Tracy. Ninety per cent of the city was destroyed and for a while, there were serious plans to scrap the left-overs and build a completely different city.

After all, what was there to save and why? Yet the majority of Darwin residents fought tooth and nail to save and rebuild their city. Darwin survived because of the depth of their attachment, because of the refusal to imagine that their place was nothing more than a collection of ruins, a massive and terrible eyesore.

In London, the question of memorialisation will emerge soon enough, just as it has in other places marked by violence and loss. How do we mark and remember these places, especially the ones deeply underground, which are so inaccessible for relatives and mourners, and which will inevitably be reintegrated in the city's transport system?

These questions are particularly difficult, yet we need to mark and honour not just the tragic deaths of those killed in the terrorist attacks, but the intense, profound, self-renewing connection between people and their city under attack.

Maria Tumarkin is author of Traumascapes: The Power and Fate of Places Traumatised by Tragedies, just published by Melbourne University Press.