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Short scientific article

## CONTESTED SITES: ETHNIC CONFLICT AND URBAN GOVERNANCE IN A BOSNIAN TOWN

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*Abstract:* The built environment of a city – like landmarks, monuments, street signs – is often managed and manipulated by the state and ethnic or religious elites in various ways and contexts. This paper aims to understand the peculiarities of these processes in ethnically divided cities. This is important to understand as the change and politics of monumentality and landmarks in ethnically divided cities are important contributors to the national ethnic stability and in the same time important factors in ethnic conflicts. The particular case in focus is the city of Mostar in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

*Keywords:* ethnically divided cities, landmarks, urban governance, Mostar, post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina.

### 1. The rationale: the politics of landmarks and monuments in divided cities

The built environment of a city – like landmarks, monuments, street signs – is often managed and manipulated by the state and ethnic or religious elites. The social sciences worldwide have devoted a lot of important works on this, e.g. Anderson (1983), Bender (1993, 1998), Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), Herzfeld (1987, 1997), Harvey (1973, 2000), Lefebvre (1991), Soja (1996), etc. As many of these works show, political and national elites decide in which ways and contexts some parts of the built environment are privileged and others ignored in the processes of rediscovering the past. For example, in her research on Israel Abu El-Haj (2001) analyzed how archaeology intervened and created new phenomena that shaped the political, territorial, and cultural realities within which the present and the future of Israeli society are framed. Yalouri (2001) has shown that the Acropolis in Athens, while typically viewed in the context of ancient Athenian society, is today shaped by many local and international meanings.

In the quest to understand how Greeks deal with the national and international features of their ancient classical heritage, she writes that this historic site is a powerful agent for negotiations of power not only on the local,

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but also on an international level. Bender's work on Stonehenge also explores how the landscape has been appropriated and contested, and invokes the debates and experiences of people who have very different and often conflicting experiences of the same place (Bender, 1998, see also Bender, 1993, Bender and Winer, 2001). The creation of spaces and places for people to express divergent viewpoints of Stonehenge is powerfully constrained by social and political forces that let some voices be heard and others not.

This paper focuses on understanding the managing and manipulating of landmarks, monumentality and physicality of the built environment in an ethnically divided city. The initial argument is that the politics of monumentality and landmarks has many peculiarities in divided cities: there, they might be more important than elsewhere, particularly in the conflicts owing to ethnic or nationalist differences. In these cities, monumentality and landmarks are important contributors to national ethnic stability and - at the same time - important factors in ethnic conflicts. In cities like Mostar, Jerusalem, Nicosia and Beirut ethnic identity and nationalism create pressures on autonomy and territorial separation. There, not only group rights and different interpretations of history are subjects of inter-group conflicts, but also the city itself – as a territory where the struggles for gaining the right to land can be most intense and visible. There, urban planning and any other urban change both in the skyline and on squares, streets or bars hold the key to the management of ethnic conflicts in many ways and contexts. Borneman writes that this struggle for the production of different nations was nowhere more transparent than in divided Berlin, where the differences between the West German narrative of prosperity and success and the East German narrative, in which such values were not equally emphasized, were most visible (Borneman, 1992b:45, see also Borneman, 1992a).

In this paper I focus on the case of the divided city of Mostar in Bosnia-Herzegovina to understand in what ways and contexts the monumentality and landmarks have been used in the national (re)building processes in the post-1995 period. The data was produced in several phases since 2010 and it is part of a larger fieldwork research conducted in Mostar.

## **2. The context: the rebuilding of Mostar after the Bosnian wars**

Mostar was divided during and after the Bosnian wars (1992-95) into a Bosniac-dominated east and Croat-dominated west part of the city. There are no mixed neighborhoods on any side, even though since 2004 there is no administrative border. While some city dwellers are returning to their pre-war residences and some just choose to live on the other side, these people are still very few.

The city was divided during the war in several phases. The partition line that in the post-war times separates the municipal districts with a Croat majority and the municipal districts with a Bosniac majority is the same line that was

formed in May 1993 when the Bosniac and Croat army pointed their guns at each other after the joint battles against the Serb forces. From that moment on, only limited pedestrian and vehicular movements were allowed across the line. Massive crossings happened in the spring of 1993, when all Muslim citizens departed in a forced or voluntary manner from the west to the east side of the city. After the completion of that process, only occasional crossings, most of them westwards, happened for reasons of consumption of food or seeing relatives, and all of them could be accomplished only in the short periods of relative peace. The partition line is a composition of several streets running north to south in the middle of the city. The longest of them, separating the central parts of the city and running roughly parallel to the Neretva River, is the *Bulevar Narodne Revolucije* – or just the *Bulevar* (boulevard), as locals call it. The entire length of the border was militarized throughout the war and there were several checkpoints where the movement of the city dwellers from one side to the other was controlled and administered. The checkpoints were removed when the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina was formed (March 1994); at that time crossings became officially sanctioned, but yet very rare in the beginning. The separating of the housing zones was completed soon after. Until the war, the two ethno-religious groups were living in mixed housing zones only. The first mass migrations from one side to the other happened during the war when families were forcibly evicted from their homes overnight and were forced to move to “their” side of the city. After the war, many people sold their property to city dwellers from the other side and bought a property on “their” side of the city. Some of these relocations of city dwellers from one side to the other were part of housing exchange programs – a family from one side of the city would give the house to a family of the other side and move in their house on their side. According to Bose, in the immediate post-war times only thirty-five Croat city dwellers were living on the Bosniac side (Bose, 2007).

During the post-war reconstruction processes Mostar relied almost exclusively on foreign donations and expertise. The Washington Agreement of March 1994 ended the armed conflict between the Bosniac and Croat forces, after which a complex framework of political and administrative rule was implemented in the already divided city. The Council of Europe formally decided in May 1994 to carry out a major Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) Joint action under the terms of Article J3 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) to support the administration of the City of Mostar (Winn and Lord 2001:76). The challenge was to develop new strategies of conflict management and resolution, the result of which was the formation of the European Union Administration of Mostar (EUAM) headed by Hans Koschink, a former long-term mayor of Bremen, Germany and a former member of the German Bundestag. The EUAM was also envisaged by the Washington Agreement (for more see Yarwood, 1999). The EUAM team started working under difficult conditions, including destroyed residential and representative sites, a collapsed local economy, as well as sporadic shelling and local violent conflicts. Their goals included a reconstruction of buildings and infrastructure, freedom of movement across the front line, a unified police force as well as new urban

planning and housing matters, particularly in relation to the establishment of conditions suitable for the return of refugees and displaced persons and the restoration of public services, such as electricity and water (Yarwood, 1999:7). The final result of the EUAM mandate was a de facto partition of the city (see Bollens, 2007, 2008 for more). In 1996, at the end of the EUAM's mandate, an Interim Statute of the city was reached according to which seven municipal districts were formed within the city, three with a Croat majority in the west and three with a Bosniac majority in the east and one smaller jointly controlled Central Zone. Each of the sides and the central administration established their own separate urban planning institutions and proceeded to restore and develop the city simultaneously, but in isolation from each another (Bollens, 2007; 2008). The three municipal districts on each side had separate city administrations and a separate mayor until 2004, which created a particular political and institutional context in post-war Mostar in which the major changes of monuments and landmarks took place.

### **3. The process: the change of monuments and landmarks in the post-war period**

The monuments and landmarks in post-war Mostar have been changed in various modes. The skyline of the city, for example, has been changed on both sides – mostly religious signs have been placed on spots visible from afar. Minarets with bulbs, whose number is much higher than in pre-war times, dominate the skyline of the Bosniac/Muslim side. The skyline of the Croat/Catholic side has been changed in a similar way: there, the new bell tower of the Franciscan Church of Ss. Peter and Paul and the Jubilee Cross on the Hum Hill dominate the view. The bell tower of the Franciscan Church was built on the place of a tower ruined during the war, but the new post-war tower is approximately *three times taller than the pre-war version* and fundamentally changes the visual image of the city. The cross on the Hum Hill, located in the vicinity of the Franciscan Church, was erected in 2000 to mark the two-thousandth anniversary of the birth of Jesus (see Photo 1).

**Photo 1. The bell tower of the Franciscan Church of Ss. Peter and Paul and the Jubilee Cross on the Hum Hill**

*Source: photo taken by author*

Both projects were promoted by their initiators as symbols of peace and better future (see Makas, 2007 for more). For example, the new design of the bell tower was promoted as a result of the struggle of Croats/Catholics in Bosnia-Herzegovina over their land and identity and, moreover, as a positive symbol of humankind. In her close analyses of the local and international press and literature related to the church tower, Makas (2007, see also Makas, 2006) notes that a Franciscan friar has written that the cross on the top of the tower is mounted on a spherical base and represents the earth and symbolizes mankind, and that the window on the western façade depicts five doves and a cross which are meant as Christian symbols of peace (see Makas, 2007: 265). In another account, as Makas notes, a journalist expresses the hope “that the new bell tower will be a linking object and proof of the power of coexistence and multi-ethnicity in Mostar... Mostar must heal the war wounds, the hatred must change into tolerance and understanding, so that again as before, the mosque and the church will exchange greetings and prayers to the one God who made us all, and who in the same way, also supports us all” (Milic, 2002: 15, quoted in Makas, 2007: 265). And yet, for others the bell tower is “a steroidal concrete monster whose architecturally illiterate and over-scaled campanile can be seen for miles”

(Bevan, 2001, quoted in Sells, 2003: 329). The conflict over the dominance of these big landmarks is also visible in other published narratives of city dwellers in the local press: "...if many Mostarians mind the gigantic cross on the Hum Hill, placed at the spot of a bunker from which the HVO and HV were killing Bosniacs and destroying the city, the others mind that the call to prayer issued from the mosques in Mostar is louder than before"<sup>2</sup>.

However, many have recognized the bell tower as a symbol of the post-war Croat interpretations of land and identity. Sells (2003) writes that the rhetoric of creating symbols of peace and tolerance linked to conspicuous projects is a wider phenomenon in Herzegovina. He writes about the Franciscan Church in Mostar in the context of the role of the Catholic Church in the ethnic conflicts in Herzegovina. The religious institutions in their ideological manifestations in Bosnia-Herzegovina, he argues, have traditionally been stronger at promoting an interior identity in opposition to the religious "other" rather than in affirming identity of the "other". Thus, the religious manifestations were viewed either as incidental or as masks for other more complex social, political and economic issues; or else categorized exclusively as aspects of ethnicity (Sells, 2003: 309). What is more, the Catholic leadership and institutions in Herzegovina have played an important role in the conflict which can be seen not only in Mostar, but also - as Sells (2003) argues - in many other sites, such as the systematic annihilation of non-Catholic sacred sites and the superimposition of new Catholic shrines on the ruins of the just-destroyed non-Catholic sacral heritage.

On a smaller scale, it is worth noting that the names of the streets were also changed in the post-war times. On the Croat side of the city, for example, the new names are inspired by the history of Croatia and all the names referring to any part of the history of Bosnia-Herzegovina are being replaced with a Croat version. The editorial of the magazine "Most" has argued that the new street names in West Mostar have a somewhat "fascist" ring (Most No. 54<sup>3</sup>). Street signage has been changed in the Croat municipalities, too. The blue background of the street signs which were the same for all parts of the city in the pre-war times were changed to red in west/Croat Mostar.

Pre-war monuments were also replaced with new ones in post-war times. There are many examples for this, and here I will outline only the case of the "Monument of the Fallen Croat Defenders in the Homeland War" (Makas, 2007) to illustrate how space and monumentality has been used in the nation-building project in post-war times. While many aspects of this monument are significant in this regard, those related to the design are the most telling (see Photo 2). The monument is a cube composed of fourteen pillars on which a cross is imprinted. On the other side of the cube is an image of a pieta representing mother's pain for her son. Since a pieta is a Christian symbol, the sculpture in this case

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<sup>2</sup> <http://most.ba/03940/004.htm>

<sup>3</sup> <http://most.ba/055/004.htm>

represents a Croat mother crying for her Croat son. Designed as such, the monument suggests many boundary markers: first, its name and design (cross and pieta) show that the monument is excluding the Bosniac/Muslim defenders of the city altogether. Bosniacs/Muslims were also members of the military force that was defending the city against the Serbian army in the first part of the war when Bosniacs and Croats fought on the same side. The question is: who are the defenders that are being celebrated here and “whose” Mostar did they defend to be acclaimed as heroes? Even though the Croat military force participated in the defense of the whole city in the first siege, in the second siege they were shelling East Mostar (now Bosniac/Muslim) for a long period of time, destroyed many houses and mosques and killed many citizens, and a celebration of these acts can be considered as inappropriate. Second, one may argue that the monument suggests that Christianity and Mostar are historically inseparable and neglects the presence of Islam in the territory of Mostar and Herzegovina. And lastly, its name, design and meaning disregard the historical cohabitation of Croats and Bosniacs in this city using a very powerful image – the mother. By depicting the mother as Christian, the monument excludes all those mothers whose sons are offspring of parents from different religions and fully excludes the Muslim mother (see Photo 2).

It is worth noting that there were initiatives produced in various civic engagements and organized by the city dwellers themselves. One project that gained a regional and worldwide fame is the “Bruce Lee” monument. The statue to the Chinese-American Hollywood Kung-Fu star, whose films were popular among the youth in the last decades of Yugoslavia, was initiated and completed by the members of a local non-profit organisation called “Urban Movement”. The monument proposal was part of a larger project called “De/Construction of Monument” which was organized by the Sarajevo Center for Contemporary Art, the aim of which was to promote interactive public art and creative use of public space throughout Bosnia-Herzegovina, including a conference and many art installations in Sarajevo (Makas, 2007:306, Raspudic, 2004). The statue was erected in the largest park in West/Croat Mostar in 2005, a day before Lee’s birthday. While most of the urban planning projects and the overall policy work in the post-war recovery process have relied almost exclusively on foreign donations and expertise, the Bruce Lee monument is one of the few projects that were initiated by the city dwellers themselves. The initiators promoted the monument as a symbol of their shared childhood memories and of the united city from the past that should stand next to the – according to them – over-politicized monuments that were erected after the war (Raspudic, 2004). Thus, they suggested that several aspects of the monument itself are significant for the divided city: as outlined in the speech of one of the initiators, the monument depicts Lee’s defensive Kung Fu pose, as his famous attacking pose from his films wouldn’t fit the context (see Raspudic, 2004, also see Makas, 2007: 306). Besides the pose, the statue’s orientation is significant too: it is facing north, rather than east, which would have symbolized defending one side of the city from the other (Raspudic, 2004, Makas, 2007: 306). Moreover, the inscription on

the monument reads “Tvoj Mostar” (Your Mostar), without any reference to city sides, ethnicity or religion. As such, the Bruce Lee monument serves as an example of how bottom-up initiatives can escape the dominant urban governance strategies.

**Photo 2. The “Monument of the Fallen Croat Defenders in the Homeland War”**



*Source: photo taken by author*

The post-war reconstruction plans for Mostar also included zones where landmarks and monuments that provide symbols and meanings that are important only to one ethno-religious group cannot be built. This is the so-called “Central Zone”. The idea of the team of planners was to create a zone which would be the basis for a future unification of the city and which would facilitate the planning of joint urban spaces and institutions. The aim was to use planning and urbanism to bridge the ethnic divisions. Thus, it was planned that the “Central Zone” should be administered by an ethnically balanced city council and administration. It was planned as a place of neutral planning strategies and it consists of a common strip of land along the partition line that was created during war-time (Makas, 2007, Bollens, 2007, 2008). The exact size and the borders of the Central Zone were fiercely debated by all sides (see Wimmen, 2004, Makas, 2007). On the one hand, the Croat side wanted no Central Zone at all, but rather a confirmation of the war-time border between the two sides (Makas, 2007). The Bosniac side, on the other hand, suggested a Central Zone that included one third



of the city's urban centre (Makas, 2007: 191) and thus not only the wider area around the war-time border, but also the Rodno area and other sites that today comprise the central part of the Croat/West Mostar. The eventual solution was a compromise that largely displeased the Croat community (see Makas, 2007). It also provoked violent protests and riots of the Croat ultranationalists on February 7, 1996, after which the car of the president of the EUAM mandate, Hans Koschink, was sprayed with gunshots (Udovički, 2000: 283). This final suggestion included a "Central Zone", which was only half the size the Bosniac community suggested and also included sites equally significant for the two communities (see Makas, 2007). Today, indeed, there are no monuments and landmarks within the Central Zone that belong to one side only. However, the urban planning strategies which it was part of have provided the overall context in which such particular change of landmarks and monuments took place.

#### **4. The argument: landmarks, monuments and the national (re)building projects**

The examples outlined above show that the rebuilding of post-war Mostar happened in a context in which political and religious actors from the two sides used landmarks, monuments and the design of spaces to achieve a situation in which the ethno-religious division of the city is represented and reproduced in the urban context (Wimmen, 2004, Makas, 2007, see also Bollens, 2007, 2008). Bollens further argues that urbanism and urban governance in post-war Mostar have been the primary means by which war profiteers have reinforced ethnic divisions; "war by means other than overt fighting has been carried out in Mostar for 10 years after the open hostilities of 1992–1994" (Bollens, 2007: 247). Makas (2007) and Wimmen (2004) further argue that the two sides acted differently in that process.

These processes are certainly a result of the particular urban planning strategies in the post-war period. Bollens writes that "a central plank of the international community's urban strategy in postwar Mostar represents both the promise and pitfalls of 'neutral' planning and spatial buffering as means of reconstituting a city of extreme division" (2008: 1277). Calame and Charlesworth (2009), for example, compared Mostar, Nicosia, Jerusalem and Beirut and argue that unlike the rest of the cases the focus in the urban planning processes in Mostar was on the symbolic built environment. According to them, this is a motivational rather than functional revitalization strategy and at the same time "virtual rather than actual recovery" (2009:191). Bieber, too, in his local comparison between two Bosnian divided cities, Mostar and Brčko, concludes that less formal systems of power-sharing, as instituted in Brčko, has been more successful than the complex territorial fragmentation of post-war Mostar (Bieber, 2005, see also Bieber, 2006). Until the imposed unification in early 2004, Mostar was governed by a high degree of formal power-sharing and separate administration of ethnically homogenous municipalities. Brčko, on the other

hand, was created as a united district which has been administered by a low degree of formal power-sharing and its unification proved to be faster and durable. Chandler also suggested that the heavy-handed intervention by the international bodies in Bosnia-Herzegovina delayed democratization and effectively empowered the national parties (Chandler, 1999: 144-151, quoted in Bieber, 2006).

Similar processes are visible in other ethnically divided cities. In Beirut, for example, a private company was guiding the post-war urban reconstruction of the historic center. This strategy of “engagement through privatization” (Calame and Charlesworth, 2009: 184) or of “depoliticizing space” (Erdentug and Colombijn, 2002: 237) is the only example of a private foreign company making core decisions in the historic center of a divided city. Yet, scholars have argued that this is only a way of an indirect involvement of the Lebanese government, which it still determines the spatial decisions in the city (Erdentug and Colombijn, 2002: 237). As Schmid (2006) argues, this reconstruction of post-war Beirut is characterized by the exclusion of most of the protagonists involved, which include the city dwellers themselves, the tenants, owners, and refugees, and also the former elites who were replaced by a group of newcomers and investors (2006: 365). Jerusalem and Nicosia are examples of other aspects of the same processes. Jerusalem is an example of a centralized planning strategy: the municipal government’s urban planning department implements projects only according to the government’s decisions. Erdentug and Colombijn (2002) call this strategy “partisan planning”, in which the state dominated by the Jewish population “has clearly pushed back the Arab population to a limited space” (2002: 237). Nicosia is a different example. There, local - rather than international - professionals were involved in the planning processes. Yet, unlike in Mostar, the core focus was not on landmarks and symbolic meanings, but on schemes of neighborhood revitalization in the areas near the Old City separated by the division line (Calame and Charlesworth, 2009: 181-182). Moreover, all of these projects had a mainly pragmatic nature, rather than a symbolic one (see for example Papadakis, 1994 on museums in divided Nicosia).

## Conclusion

Many important studies in social sciences have shown that the built environment of a city – like landmarks, monuments, street signs – is often managed and manipulated by the state and ethnic or religious elites in various ways and contexts (e.g. Anderson, 1983, Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983, Herzfeld, 1987, 2005, Harvey, 1973, 2000, Lefebvre, 1991, Soja, 1996). This paper has shown that these processes have peculiarities of their own in ethnically divided cities, as monuments and landmarks in these cities are important contributors to national ethnic stability and, at the same time, important factors in ethnic conflicts. In particular, the case of post-war Mostar in Bosnia-Herzegovina has shown how political and religious actors from the two sides of a divided city

used landmarks, monuments and the design of spaces to achieve a situation in which the ethno-religious division is represented and reproduced in these post-war sites, thus making it more visible and apparent to others.

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## ОСПОРЕНИ МЕСТА: ЕТНИЧКИОТ КОНФЛИКТ И УРБАНОТО УПРАВУВАЊЕ ВО БОСАНСКИ ГРАД

**Ана АЦЕСКА**

*Айстѝраќѝ:* Изградената средина на градот – како знаменитостите, спомениците, уличните знаци – често е управувана и предмет на манипулација од страна на етничките или верските елити на различни начини и во различни контексти. Овој труд настојува да ги разбере карактеристиките на овие процеси во етнички поделените градови. Ова разбирање е значајно бидејќи промената и политиката на монументалност и знаменитости во етнички поделените градови се важни контрибутори за националната етничка стабилност и, во исто време, значајни фактори во етничките конфликти. Конкретниот случај во фокусот е градот Мостар во Босна и Херцеговина.

*Клучни зборови:* етнички поделени градови, знаменитости, урбано управување, Мостар, поствоена Босна и Херцеговина.