

# The Architectural Review

**‘To destroy a nation’s architecture is to attack the cultural identity of its people’**

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Architectural heritage forms a symbol of a people’s culture and identity that must be respected and protected

The images of the Temple of Bel in Palmyra – the 2,000-year-old Syrian monument, designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site and considered the most important temple of the Middle East, but destroyed by Isis in August 2015 – are a constant reminder, if ever there were the need, that cultural and architectural heritage are crucial aspects of international conflicts. Palmyra is just the latest, and possibly the most devastating, destruction of world’s heritage that has occurred in areas of warfare in recent years.

‘When a terrorist organisation destroys a historic site, it underlines the importance of buildings as expressions of culture, memory and power’

When a terrorist organisation like Isis chooses to demonstrate its 'supremacy' to the world by destroying a historic site, it underlines the importance of buildings as expressions of culture, memory and, of course, power. Architecture matters. Especially in time of conflict when the need to identify with symbols and symbolism is urgent, and the destruction of built artifacts becomes a clear attempt to erase memory and cultural identity.

Ruins represent also a profitable source. Terrorists sell artifacts and relics to the black market to bankroll other attacks – but this represents just a secondary aspect. The destruction of symbols, the 'show' accurately filmed, is a substantial part of the propaganda and behind, there is a precise strategy to affect our wavelength/mentality.

By killing and executing hundreds, thousands of people, they touch our sense of justice. By razing meaningful architectures, our symbols, they touch our inner consciences, something universal. Expanded media coverage and piqued attention are all evidences of this terror tactic that takes advantage of symbols' visibility worldwide. This happened during the raid of Palmyra more than ever. Sadly, even more than dozens of hostage executions occurred in the same conflict areas.

This change of perspective spreads more and more. In September 2015 we had a tangible sign: for the first time, the International Criminal Court pursued someone for destroying a cultural monument. Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi, a member of al Qaeda, is suspected of destroying nine mausoleums and a mosque within the ancient North African city and UNESCO World Heritage Site of Timbuktu in 2012.

'The case against Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi breaks new ground for the protection of humanity's shared cultural heritage'

The Hague court, which usually goes after individuals who violate humanitarian law during conflicts, began a new path. 'This is the first such case and it breaks new ground for the protection of humanity's shared cultural heritage and values,' said UNESCO director general Irina Bokova. 'The cultural heritage of Mali belongs to all humanity. It is vital that the criminals be brought to justice.'

The relationship between architecture, identity and war is something often ignored by the general agenda of architectural critics and writers. Few pursue this field of research. Among them we can find Jean-Louis Cohen, curator of the international exhibition *Architecture in Uniform: Designing and Building for the Second World War* (displayed first at the Canadian Centre for Architecture and then at the MAXXI) and Robert Bevan, architecture critic for the *London Evening Standard* and writer of *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War* (Reaktion Books, 2007). They attempt, in different ways, to analyse the transdisciplinary nature of architecture by studying collateral sides of the discipline.



mausoleum timbuktu

#### Reconstruction of the Mausoleum of Timbuktu, Mali

For their research, both were invited to be part of the Meeting Architecture programme, a series of lectures and exhibitions that the British School at Rome has organised as of 2013. Curated by Marina Engel, it features a number of initiatives that are planned until 2017. 'Culture, Identity and Genocide' was the lecture delivered by Bevan in Rome on Thursday 10 December 2015. The first event of 'Fragments', the third edition of the BSR programme, it explores how memories and ideologies are constantly tied to buildings and their contents.

'The destruction of the built artefacts of a people or nation is a means of cultural cleansing'

In his book, Bevan examines some of the most pivotal events that have occurred in recent history such as the Nazi attacks on Jewish architecture during the Second World War, the destruction and rebuilding of Warsaw, the bombing of Dresden and the war in Bosnia – all cases that suggest a key to better interpret recent events in the Middle East.

Bevan argues that the destruction of the built artefacts of a people or a nation is a means of cultural cleansing or division in order to annihilate the identity of a people.

*'The targeted destruction of material culture has continued for centuries but, despite the connection between such attacks and human rights first being made before the adoption of the Genocide Convention, this vital point is still barely recognised today. What should we be doing to address this?'* he asks.

Until now there has been the tendency, at an international level, to separate human genocide from its cultural counterpart – the latter is generally considered to be collateral damage but after September 11th this assumption has been radically shifted. ‘Place matters. The buildings are the target,’ Bevan points out – a concept reinforced by the strong bond between architecture and power that results in the consideration of buildings as symbols of ideals, principles and political statements. Destroying these symbols is not just an act of vandalism, it is far more extreme, it is the manifestation of a precise intention: to exterminate fragments of culture, to dissolve the identity of communities.

History has given us a plethora of examples of this cruel ritual being applied. The Stari Most, a 16th-century Ottoman bridge in the city of Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, was destroyed in 1993 by the Croatian army during the Croat-Bosniak War because it was one of the most renowned examples of Islamic architecture in the Balkans. After the end of the war, UNESCO decided to reconstruct the original bridge by using local materials and Ottoman construction techniques – in doing so it created a replica that denies the traumatic event.

‘Bevan proposes reconstruction, in which the tragic episode is reinterpreted by a new piece of architecture that expresses the power of that which is no longer visible’

This procedure of faithfully rebuilding what has been damaged is conducted by UNESCO worldwide, but the discussion is open and full of controversial positions among architects, historians and critics. What Bevan suggests instead – and with him several experts – is to have a critical approach to reconstruction, in which past and present coexist, and where the tragic episode is somewhat reinterpreted by a new piece of architecture that, in itself, expresses the power of that which is no longer visible.

A fine example of this attitude is the New Synagogue in Dresden, built in 2001 on the site of the original Semper Synagogue (designed by Gottfried Semper), which was destroyed in 1938 by the Nazis during *Kristallnacht*. The new building, designed by architects Rena Wandel-Hoefer and Wolfgang Lorch, is at once an expression of the contemporaneity while standing testimony to its past. It incorporates the last remaining parts of the original building by using modern materials and forms. In this way it doesn't deny the evidence of what happened; it starts to write a new conscious memory.

‘Without political solutions, the world's built heritage will constantly be at risk’

Now, more than ever, thanks to the work of reporters, researchers, writers and, to an increasing extent, social media, the stories of cultural destructions are being reported globally, even if they happen to unknown or faraway cultures. An important contribution to this cause is represented by the documentary *The Destruction of Memory*; directed by Tim Slade and an adaptation of Bevan's book, this will be officially launched in New York in 2016, bringing together a highly experienced documentary filmmaking team, which will bring passion and insight to the subject. A special preview shown at the BSR during Bevan's lecture demonstrated how the film continues the discussion to the present day and describes the current war against material culture in the Middle East.

It is hoped that with public awareness regarding these critical issues increasing day by day, our politicians will be forced to place them at the top of their political agendas because, it seems clear from the recent past, without political solutions the world's built heritage will constantly be at risk. And with it our story. Who we are. Our identity.

### **The British School at Rome programme**

Meeting Architecture III will continue to explore the relationship between architecture and other creative processes and consider how architecture works together with the other visual arts as well as with history, modern studies and archaeology, some of the principal research disciplines at the BSR. Future events, in 2016, include: Francesco Bandarin (Italy, Architect and Assistant-Director General of UNESCO for Culture and Former Secretary of the World Heritage Convention), Dor Guez (Israel Visual Artist and head of the Photography Department at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Jerusalem), Eyal Weizman (Israel, Architect and Professor of Spatial and Visual Culture, Director of the Centre for Research Architecture at Goldsmiths, University of London and Global Professor at Princeton University), Miroslaw Balka (Poland Artist), and Joseph Rykwert (Britain, Architectural Historian and Paul Philippe Cret Emeritus Professor of Architecture, University of Pennsylvania).

[www.bsr.ac.uk](http://www.bsr.ac.uk)

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