



# PULVERIZING THE PAST





## The erasure of history can be political, economic—or aesthetic.

by Hubert Murray FAIA

**On the night of May 6, 1993**, Serbian militia targeted and destroyed the Ferhat Pasha mosque in Banja Luka, Bosnia, the city's most important place of worship and one of the finest examples of 16th-century Ottoman architecture in the Balkans. The mosque was not only blown up, but the rubble—including tiles and architectural ornament—was crushed and carted off as landfill, and the site paved over for use as a parking lot. The intent of the aggressor was to eliminate a people and its history from living memory.

Thirty-five years earlier, in May 1958, demolition crews had moved into Boston's West End neighborhood to begin a three-year period of "slum clearance," subsidized by federal funding, executed by the Boston Redevelopment Authority, and abetted by a private developer with close political ties. Estimates put the preclearance population at about 20,000, a mix of more than 20 ethnic, cultural, or religious identities. More than 7,000 residents were directly affected by the demolition, which created 50 acres of developable land recognizable today by the towers of Charles River Park.

The response of the Bosnians to the pulverization of their center of religious and social life has been to reconstruct the mosque in meticulous detail, building from record drawings and photographs developed by the University of Sarajevo School of Architecture as a studio for teaching measured drawing. The reconstruction is now well under way, a reassertion of communal identity and resilience.

The West Enders, on the other hand, scattered to the suburbs. Without real estate and the wherewithal to physically reconstruct their community, they have created out of the rubble what one of them calls a "neighborhood of the mind"—a virtual community sustained by reunions, the West End Museum, and *The West Ender* newspaper.

Superficial differences notwithstanding (ethnic cleansing is not slum clearance), the response of both communities has been an assertion of communal identity through resolute resistance to the erasure of

memory. In both cases, architecture and the urban fabric have played important roles as the armature and repository of communal memory in enabling, sustaining, and even promoting social and individual aspirations.

For the Bosnians of Banja Luka, the Ferhat Pasha mosque was a manifestation of social identity and aspiration just as the streets of the West End represented for generations of Boston immigrants the living, pulsing potential of the American melting pot. In both responses, there is an invocation of memory as instrument (record drawings for reconstruction; museum exhibits documenting the vitality of an urban neighborhood) and as inspiration, re-creating the past physically or virtually to ensure a future. As barbarous as atrocities against individual people may be, the wholesale elimination of the communal past can be more chillingly effective as a way of ensuring no future for a people.

As easy as it may be to draw this conclusion when describing the intents and effects of bloody war, there is also a cautionary inference to be made in reviewing the destructive record of modernity in architecture and urban planning.

Le Corbusier's visionary projects, the "Plan Voisin" for Paris (1925) and more particularly his "Ilot Insalubre No. 6 à Paris" (1937), are calls to erase the existing city fabric and start afresh in a city of high-rise towers linked by superhighways and aerial walkways over fields of green. The point here is not necessarily Le Corbusier's specific vision of the street as "a machine for traffic" or any of his other recommendations, but his insistence that the world must begin again—that the city must be seen as a tabula rasa to create an architecture commensurate with the new age.

Le Corbusier was not unique in this aggressive utopianism. The Futurists before him, in their 1914 *Messaggio*, declared that their vision for architecture "cannot be subject to any law of historical continuity. It must be as new as our frame of mind is new." Even Gropius, in less messianic terms, determined that architecture should be taught as craft, and art history not taught as a "history

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of styles, but rather to further active understanding of historical working methods and techniques.”

In other words, for the Modernists, history—our collective memory—was as it was for Henry Ford: bunk.

Following the trauma of the First World War, this attitude is perhaps understandable: The recent memory of massive slaughter was too much to bear. So, too, with the Second World War. The journalist and historian Giles Tremlett, writing about the aftermath of Franco’s Spain, sees something of this “running away forwards” in the Spanish love of modernity, especially in the development of coastal resorts. “The eagerness with which the new is embraced has something to do with the memory, real or inherited, of poverty,” in many cases only one generation away.

Less explicable, except perhaps through an interpretation of presidential hubris, is the avowedly antimemorial essence of François Mitterand’s Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, which the novelist W.G. Sebald describes in the words of one of his characters “as the official manifestation of the increasingly importunate urge to break with everything which still has some living connection with the past.”

It seems that Marx was right in his not altogether unadmiring assessment of capitalism’s “constant

revolutionizing of production... All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned...”

This might almost have been advertiser’s copy for the building of the Centre Beaubourg in Paris, or the demolition of the *hutongs* of Beijing.

The allure of modernity is manifested in the major cities of too many newly developing countries in all quarters of the globe, bristling as they are with glass towers—take your pick from Shenzhen, Abu Dhabi, Lagos, or Bucharest. These architectural stage sets are the signifiers of modernity and “success” on one side of the coin; an escape from complicated pasts associated with rural or nomadic life on the other—the squalor of poverty and, in some cases, the shame of parochial identities, prejudices, and animosities.

The alienating qualities of capitalism and its voracious appetite for land and lives are only too obvious, particularly to those who are dispossessed, whether they be the West Enders in Boston or the shanty dwellers of Nairobi’s Mathare Valley. No amount of collective storytelling can assuage the loss of place or opportunity in a winner-take-all society. And in a “constantly

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revolutionizing" world, there is not necessarily safe haven in an imagined community of the past.

A passive alternative to the physical destruction of place is the insidiously effective erasure of names. The original St. Petersburg in Russia, named for the tsar and invoking the saint, was changed in secular, democratic, prerevolutionary times to Petrograd; following the revolution to Leningrad; and in the post-Soviet era back to the original. It is like a series of linguistic and historical photo-shoppings, made to conform with the prevailing ideology and to erase its predecessor. The naming of the streets and residential towers built over the ruins of the West End for Emerson, Thoreau, and Hawthorne suggests that the linguistic erasure of memory is not a lost art.

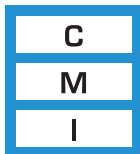
But to address Marx: Is it possible to practice contemporary architecture and urbanism without the erasure of memory, without all that is solid melting into air, and without resorting to a pastiche of historical reference? Is the only alternative to the autocratic visionary Robert Moses and his massive projects a retreat into the comfortable arms of Jane Jacobs and the neighborhood action committee?

The building of the Cross-Bronx Expressway destroyed communities, smashed lives, and erased memory even

as it embodied the American dream of outward mobility. The irony of saving the West Village from destruction by the Lower Manhattan Expressway in the 1960s—a victory for neighborhood architecture—is that less prosperous residents have been exiled by the high prices that follow such preservation. Does the value of memory lie in the buildings and streets or in the people?

Examples abound of modern buildings incorporating traces of the things, events, or communities that precede them. Norman Foster's restoration of the Reichstag in Berlin is a technical tour de force, a progressive icon of German democracy that simultaneously envelops the signifiers of a troubled past, the graffiti of Soviet soldiers, and the scorch marks of an earlier assault on democracy. Ralph Erskine's Byker Wall in Newcastle, England, is an example of modern housing, a massive urban form that nevertheless enshrined the social connections and aspirations of the working-class community it replaced.

The rebuilding of the mosque at Banja Luka and the ongoing enterprise of the West End storytellers are acts of communal resilience, convincing reminders that the nurturing of shared memory is a valuable antidote to the forces of destruction and to those who believe that the future can be built as if there had not been a past. ■



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