

Alexandra Polk, CMU Thesis

Thesis Ideas:

After conducting a wide range of research on exploring the effects of war on a city and on its inhabitants and I have concluded that my focus will be primarily on acts of cultural genocide and intentional destruction of historical and culturally relevant buildings of a particular group or country. These acts of devastation and ruin are meant to destroy or rewrite the past in order to influence or dictate the future. Our perception of the world around us is based on our interactions with the built environment and the experiences that we have and common interactions with others, which creates a social identity established in time and space. In this case, architecture is the embodiment of memories, where the built environment serves as a tangible reminder of the past.

One of the most jarring quotes that I have uncovered from the Serbian civil war was from the mayor of a small town who stated “there were never any mosques in Zvornik,” after the Muslim population had been expelled and its mosques destroyed. This quote embodies the denial of a common past by the aggressors to the victims where architecture that serves as a link to the past and to the people’s identity is used as a terror tactic. In this instance, these buildings become the target, not the people themselves because they represent the community identity as a whole which is far more powerful than just attacking the individual. In one example of deliberate destruction, the citizens of Mostar felt utter shock at the collapse of the city bridge that had stood for centuries, even more so than the individual deaths of people in the town:

“Perhaps because we see our own mortality in the collapse of the bridge. We expect people to die; we count on our own lives to end. The destruction of a monument to civilization is something else. The bridge in all its beauty and grace was built to outlive us; it was an attempt to grasp eternity. It transcends our individual destiny. A dead woman is one of us- but the bridge was all of us forever”

(pg 26, *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War*, Robert Bevan)

With the multi-dimensionality of modern warfare, the destruction of cultural structures of historical worth has escalated to being considered as a war crime against humanity, for the mere fact that architecture and identity are intrinsically intertwined.

I will explore Berlin’s period of reconstruction and use it as a precedent study to understand how it has become the vibrant city that it is today while overcoming its tumultuous obstacles

throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From the destruction of Jewish Synagogues, to Allied bombing and the eventual Death Strip that segregated the city, Berlin's process of recovery has allowed it to emerge as a city full of life and possibilities, where the past remain present as a way to learn and move forward.

My thesis project site will be in the former Yugoslavia, in a city ravaged during the civil war, to explore the multitude of different stages and facets of one of the most brutal and destructive cultural genocides of my lifetime. I will propose a multi use building that will house a memorial and a public building (possibly a library), where the events of the past and the history that was meant to be destroyed can be brought to light again in the midst of positive urban regrowth. This combination of the sacred and the profane of everyday city life will allow a bridge from the past to merge and blend with the future as the present generation passes on a message to the following generations to build something that will evolve and grow with time and understanding.