

# Balkan War, Ottoman Traditions, and an American Design Studio

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In the autumn of 1993, gunners succeeded in bringing down the longest, single span stone bridge in the world. Its collapse, 427 years after its construction, became headline news around the world, even in the midst of the catastrophic levels of death and destruction which surrounded the event—the civil war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Somehow a small footbridge across the Neretva River in the scenic city of Mostar (the town's name means “bridgekeeper”) became emblematic of an aspect of the war that was particularly appalling—the deliberate destruction of the physical traces of a once-shared culture. It was, in a sense, the perverse flip side of another trend in the study and reuse of cultural resources welcomed by many of us in the field of historic preservation. The increasing identification by communities with the stories which can be told by historic sites was seen as key to their survival in an ever more fluid and globalized world. At the end of the twentieth century, preservationists in the U.S. and abroad have been actively saving places which gave a public voice to the stories and events associated with ordinary life, and with minority or oppressed or overlooked communities. But now we were confronted with an example of a site being demolished precisely because it told such a story, but one which another community wanted to forget.



Fig. 1. A Bosnian stamp showing the Stari Most before its destruction in 1993.

The Ottomans had built the Stari Most (Old Bridge) in the city of Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina, in 1566. It was designed by Mimar Hayruddin, a student of the great Ottoman architect Sinan, and sat at the heart of the scenic medieval districts of the present-day city. To the Serbian forces which began the bombardment of Mostar in 1991 and 1992, and to the Bosnian Croats who continued the attack during the

civil war in 1993 and 1994, the bridge symbolized 400-plus years of Islamic rule in the Balkans. Perhaps even more to the point, it symbolized the ongoing cultural diversity of a nation whose populace was divided into Muslims, Orthodox, Catholics and, at least up until World War II, Jews. Tourists from around the world would visit Mostar to see the bridge and the surrounding Ottoman mahalas (neighborhood districts organized around a mosque). It was the westernmost outpost of a culture different in form and character from most of the rest of Europe. And it was still alive, at least up until 1993. When the propaganda campaigns launched at the beginning of the 1990s by the various governments of the former Yugoslavia failed to erase or rewrite history, small arms and mortars were brought in.

It would be somewhat comforting if the case of the Stari Most were unique. But, of course, the destruction of historic sites because of the stories they tell is as old as history itself. And these acts of erasure are not confined to the Balkans, or even to countries engaged in war. From the smallest element of a site to the whole-scale destruction of cities to acts of genocide, rewriting history is ever present, in ways both subtle and obvious. This is true even in the United States. A plaque on the wall of a building at Olvera Street Historical Park in Los Angeles tells the story of its construction and use by early Chinese settlers—or would, if the word Chinese hadn't been scratched out by vandals. As a recently elected Latino county supervisor said at a meeting discussing the use and interpretation of the site, “It's our turn now.” Or we can look at the debate over the Confederate battle flag, and the way “Northerners” call the events of 140 years ago “the Civil War” while many in the South still refer to “the war of Northern aggression.”

It has always been true that politics has more to do with the preservation of a site than any intrinsic value attributed to it by agencies, academics, or preservation groups. Just look at the fate of historic sites in Austin, in the face of the rush to develop downtown. But the destruction of sites because of their cultural value or ability to tell a story is a case that is especially at issue in areas of cultural exchange and conflict. This includes Bosnia and the United States. In such places, because a site's significance is often related to its unusual or distinctive cultural antecedents, it is as likely to be destroyed as it is to be preserved, especially during times of rising social tension as happened during the economic collapse of Yugoslavia following the death of Tito.

For the last two years, the Advanced Studio in Historic Preservation in the University of Texas at Austin School of Architecture has been exploring these issues in the context of an ongoing international effort to rebuild Mostar, which was a World Monument Site before the war. Located in a scenic mountain valley, the city of 150,000 is halfway between Dubrovnik and Sarajevo along both banks of the Neretva River. Its growth as a city and the administrative and economic center for Herzegovina is a direct result of the building of a bridge by the Ottomans, which allowed a crossing from west to east that was psychological as well as physical. The role of the bridge in the life

of the town was more than a crossing, however. The first outing of a new infant would be to the bridge, where his or her parents would show the new citizen the object for which they were a 'keeper.' Boys seeking to demonstrate their manhood would leap off the bridge to the river 60 feet below. (In a gesture of support for the town after the war, the World Diving Championships were held in Mostar, using platforms constructed on the abutments of the destroyed bridge.) And the corso, the evening stroll by townspeople so typical of Mediterranean countries, always included the bridge, where views of the cool blue and green waters below and the dramatic mountains above provided a sense of space and release from the tightly packed streets and neighborhoods.

Then came the war. Initially, in 1991, it was the Yugoslavian army, consisting mostly of Serbians, who bombarded Mostar from the east, raining down thousands of shells on the defenseless city below. Then, after Bosnia and Croatia had succeeded in obtaining their independence, Croatia and Yugoslavia turned on Bosnia, seeking to carve it up between them. The front line on the western front was the Bulevar, the broad street in Mostar which marked the former route of the Austro-Hungarian rail line, and which also separated the medieval city from the nineteenth and twentieth century expansions. Armies took up positions on the hills on each side, and street fighters were in place on either side of the Bulevar. War raged for two years. Bosnia effectively became three countries. Dozens of towns and cities were partially or totally destroyed, thousands of people were killed, and hundreds of thousands became refugees-many abroad, but even more within their own former homeland. A significant proportion of the citizens of Mostar, ground zero in the devastation, left Bosnia during and after the war. Today, most of the inhabitants are refugees from elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia, and 70% are unemployed. A city that had been a shining example of cultural diversity and historical continuity became two segregated encampments. The Serbs (Orthodox) had been driven out. The Muslims were confined to the east side of the Bulevar and Croats (Catholic) to the west. For the past six years, despite a gradual lessening of tensions, Croatia continued to support the aspirations of Croats in Herzegovina for independence from Sarajevo and allegiance with Zagreb. While the Dayton Accords that ended the war specified a unified civil administration for the city, in actuality there were two governments. The Croats, who had started the war in Mostar by a 4 a.m. eviction at gunpoint of all Muslims in the western side of the city, still refused to cooperate with international agencies, or with orders from Sarajevo for refugee resettlement or any other acts of reintegration.



Fig. 2. The site of the Stari Most, with a temporary bridge under construction in 2000.

All this has recently begun to change. Since the death earlier this year of Franjo Tudjman, the former right-wing dictator of Croatia, the new government-democratic and hoping to rejoin the 'civilized' community of nations in Europe-has dramatically lessened its support for the Croats in Herzegovina. This summer, 10 days before our workshop began, the planning departments for the two sides of the city merged. A unified city is a genuine possibility for the first time since 1993. At the conclusion of our workshop in August, the Prime Minister of Croatia came to Mostar, pledging to us his country's support for the reconstruction of the bridge and the rebirth of the historic, multi-cultural city center. The stunning recent election in the former Yugoslavia is also cause for optimism.

This was the rather exciting and challenging context for both our design studio and visit to Bosnia. The aim of the studio, particularly this spring, was to address the rehabilitation of war-damaged buildings. But there were two other intentions as well. First, to understand more about the Islamic culture that was, in the language of post-modern discourse, the 'other,' the outsider viewed as so threatening or so hateful that it had to be destroyed. And second, to explore the power and vulnerability of cultural resources in areas of cultural exchange and conflict. The framework for this was a studio with three projects set in Mostar, and a lecture series which explored Islamic architecture and urban design under the Ottomans, as well as issues of preservation in the Middle East and eastern Europe. Then this summer, ten students from the studio and I went to Mostar to participate in the annual Mostar 2004 workshop, as well as to other sites in Croatia and Bosnia. We then continued our travels to the heart of the Ottoman Empire-Istanbul and its predecessor capital cities of Bursa and Edirne.

The studio participants were a diverse group-undergraduates working towards their Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Architecture degrees, as well as graduate students in the Master of Architecture, Master of Science in Architectural Studies in Historic Preservation, and Ph.D. programs. We began to learn about Mostar by looking at a small plaza that overlooked the Neretva River. It was the site of the first mosque in the city, which had been demolished during the Tito era, and of the Kayak Club, one of the most visible means by which Mostaris enjoyed their river. The two-week project was to design a new footbridge at that location, connecting a set of stairs, which provided one of the few points of access to the river not requiring a flight through the air, and a re-designed plaza, now being used as a parking lot, with the opposite bank of the river and a public garden.

The next two-week project was meant as an introduction to Ottoman architectural traditions. A bombed-out site in one of the mahalas was to be considered for the location of a new home for an Islamic family consisting of a mother and father, four children, and a grandmother (a rather typical situation). Students learned about the traditional Ottoman house-its courtyards, rooms defined more by response to climatic conditions than use, subtle management of layers of privacy, and other characteristics. Each student then had to decide for themselves to what degree this family, having just been through the war, would want to rebuild a traditional Ottoman home. Would they want a more Western, contemporary home? Or would they identify more with their historical traditions and culture because of their experiences? And in a modern Islamic house, what traditional features are most likely to be maintained? The resulting projects included some with added program elements such as shops, some with modern forms, some with very traditional appearance.

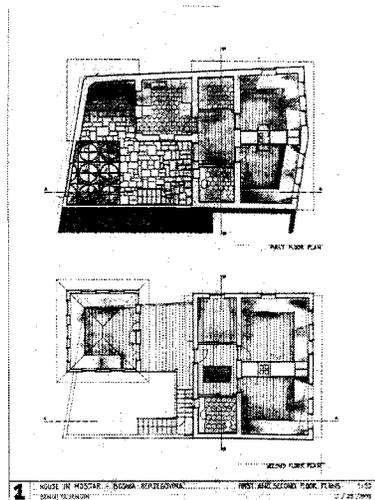


Fig. 3. A new Ottoman-style house for Mostar. Mehmet Uluengin.

The final project dealt with one of 11 buildings in Mostar designated by the World Monuments Fund as important candidates for restoration or reuse—the Serbian Primary School. An Austro-Hungarian Building from the first decade of the twentieth century, it was an example of the development that occurred in Mostar during the period between 1870 and the First World War when the Ottoman Empire was forced to grant administration of Yugoslavia to Austria-Hungary. Again, students developed their own program for the building, based on readings, lectures and discussions about what the city and its residents might need today. Among the designs developed in the studio were a women's center, a conservation institute, a film institute, a shopping and office center, a hotel, a youth hostel, a health clinic, a children's museum, an office building for aid and development agencies, a music conservatory, and centers for crafts and metal workers (the aluminum industry was important in the pre-war era).

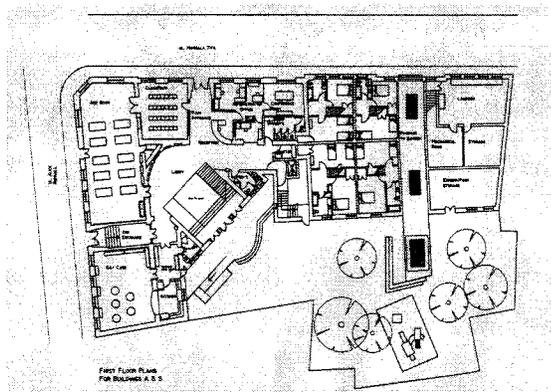


Fig. 4. A women's relief agency in the former Serbian Primary School. Amanda Bothwell.

Concurrent with the studio, a series of lectures added content and background to the projects. Nihal and Bülent Uluengin, two architecture professors from Istanbul, spoke about their work documenting the historic architecture of Mecca. There was a concurrent exhibition. Pamela Jerome from Columbia University and Caterina Borelli from Italian Radio-Television showed a new film they had made about the construction of the mud buildings of the Hadramat region of Yemen, and their future with the introduction of cement into the area. Dr. Akel Kahera lectured on Fez, and the role of Islamic law in urban design. Sami Angawi, an architect practicing in Saudi Arabia and Boston, lectured on contemporary Islamic architecture. Jon Calame, project manager for the World Monuments Fund, gave an all-day workshop

on international aid agencies and historic preservation and lectured on current efforts in the Balkans. And Dr. Barbara Parmenter lectured on Jerusalem and issues related to its history and partition. A reader with selections of contemporary and historical writings on Bosnia and the Balkans was also created for the students.

With the help of a Samuel Kress Foundation grant, various school funds, and a modest contribution from each student, three undergraduates and six graduate students from the studio left Texas on July 12, first stop Zagreb, and our introduction to the Balkans. After 25 hours of traveling, we were quite ready for a walk around the wonderful downtown, and a delicious dinner. And it was here that we had our first, small shock of the (sur)real in a serendipitous encounter with a low wall of bricks, each labeled with a name. It was an impromptu monument to residents of Zagreb killed in the war for independence. It stood there next to the sidewalk, waiting to be discovered, interjecting itself into our exuberant evening out, reminding us why we were there. And it was only one of dozens of times that we would find ourselves oscillating between sharing and enjoying the normal everyday life of these places, and having to confront, or reflect on, the recent war. But it was the next day, as we took our 11-hour ride to Mostar along the length of Croatia, that the scale of what happened began to reveal itself. For as we rode through a landscape of jagged mountains, fertile river valleys, rushing waterfalls, and dark forests, we were also riding through a patchwork quilt of abundance and abandoned villages, with every surface of the buildings covered with the pockmarks from bullets and mortar shells. This was the Krajina, a formerly Serbian region of Croatia. And gas stations, and the ever-present restaurants with whole lambs roasting on outdoor open-fire spits, motels, shopping strips, and all the other accoutrements of highway life co-existed in the same time and place with destruction, farmlands filled with land mines, towns without any real industry (but filled with street life nonetheless), and the historic remains of castles and forts and graveyards recalling other battles for this land for years beyond memory.

When we crossed the border to enter Bosnia, we entered the Croat areas of Herzegovina, still flying Croatian flags on, it seemed, every building and lamp post. And an hour and a half later, we were in Mostar. Even before we could unpack, we were rushing to the opening session of the Mostar 2004 workshop in the Bristol Hotel. Hurried hellos, and then the welcomes from various political figures and visiting dignitaries, so important to the protocols of Eastern Europe. Then dinner, and back to the various rooms in people's houses which became our homes for the next two weeks.



Fig. 5. The Austro-Hungarian era high school on the Boulevard, Mostar.

The Mostar 2004 workshop started in the summer of 1994, while the war was still raging. Organized by a Bosnian architect, Amir Pasic, who had won an Aga Khan award for his plans for the restoration of historic Mostar just a few years before, the workshop was held the first several years in Istanbul, at the Center for the Study of Islamic Art and Culture (IRCICA). The annual workshops are co-sponsored by IRCICA and the City of Mostar, Aga Khan Trust for Culture, UNESCO, World Bank, and World Monuments Fund. I was at the first workshop, and can still remember the mix of emotions as students and professionals from around Europe, America and the Middle-East tried to imagine a city healed and thriving, while we were listening to daily reports of ever-greater death and destruction. Near the end, some Bosnians managed to escape and make their way to the conference, bringing images with them of the war, and the fallen bridge. The final presentation was made to, among others, the foreign minister of Bosnia. He was to die shortly afterwards in a helicopter crash. However, since 1997, the workshop has been able to meet in Mostar, planning for the eventual reconstruction of the bridge and the city center by 2004. And each year there has been more signs of life and calm returning to Mostar. While only a few cafes were open in 1997, today the streets are lined with cafes, restaurants, discos and shops. Indeed, there are so many one wonders how they can all survive considering there is virtually no economic base for the city.

Again, in the first years back in Mostar, Bosnian Muslims who participated in the workshop were too frightened (perhaps with good reason) to cross with other students to the western, Croat, side of the city. This past summer, not only did participants move freely back and forth, but for the first time Croatian students participated (from Zagreb, however, not Mostar). And to us, for whom the destruction and suffering were new and fresh in our minds, it was amazing to see the camaraderie between the Bosnian and Croatian students.

The Sixth Annual Mostar 2004 Workshop consisted of a series of design projects, an exhaustive, and exhausting, set of lectures by various architects, faculty, city administrators and foreign aid officials, and student presentations of work done during the school year (including an exhibit of the work done by the Austin students). Almost 100 people from a dozen countries participated. For the UT students, having completed a series of studio exercises situated in the city, we were now joining the "real-life" international effort to discuss and plan Mostar's reconstruction. And issues included everything >from refugee rights to the pollution of the Neretva River to the changing postwar demographics to the political stumbling blocks that had prevented progress in Mostar for so long. In four intensive projects, students used what they had learned in the lectures and discussions, as well as their own encounters with the city, to propose focused solutions to specific problems. Workshop organizers proposed the first three project subjects; the last one, after a bit of active lobbying by the participants, was up to each individual.

The first project's goal was to transform the Bulevar. Very few people "cross over," and vehicles speed down the road as pedestrians seek shelter on the debris-covered sidewalks. Along the Bulevar stand empty plazas and shelled apartment blocks, with mattresses propped up against bullet-ridden doors, graffiti reading "United Colors of a Free Mostar," and circular sidewalk patterns of mortar shell marks serving as physical reminders of the war. Solutions to humanize the forbidding corridor included vegetative interventions, a series of bus shelters, and economic revitalization of businesses once there.

Attention in the second exercise turned to the redevelopment of housing, one of the most difficult tasks of the city as it emerges from economic and architectural ruin. Students assessed the city's potential to absorb new settlement in light of interviews with current residents and analyses of the current building types-Ottoman mahala, modernist group housing, and adaptive reuse of non-residential structures, among others. In their conclusions, most students moved away from the school-taught approach of a single-site physical intervention and toward a

broader, policy-based resolution to the problem which could integrate the extensive, ad-hoc, and largely illegal housing being built around the city.

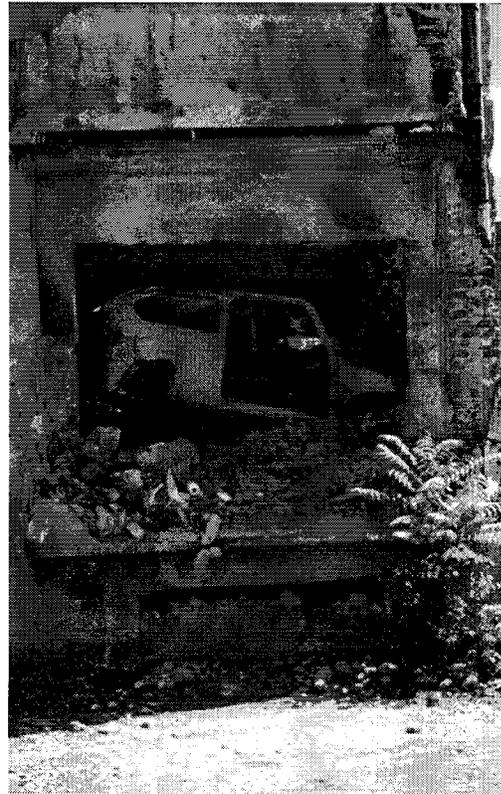


Fig. 6. War damage, Mostar.

A one-day project dealing with war monuments, including an engaging lecture by acclaimed architect Bogdan Bogdanovic on his Partisan War Memorial in Mostar, capped the list of scheduled exercises.

Finally, students were given several days to explore a topic of personal interest. Among the students at the workshop, some went off to help people building their homes, while others continued research into topics such as the physical characteristics of the traditional mahala, or how the Pavarotti Center was succeeding in using music to heal the children of war. The \_\_\_\_\_ students diverged, one choosing to continue investigating war monuments, another returning to the housing question. With the help of a translator, three students collected and gathered interviews from residents of the Route M-17 squatter settlement in the hills outside town. And four-fighting spiders, dust, darkness, and heat-produced a set of measured drawings of a decrepit riverside restaurant for Mostar's Preservation Institute in the hopes that the drawings would ensure the building's reuse. Meanwhile, our remaining student, Bengü, continued as the lead staff person for the Mostar 2004 workshop, coordinating the effort as he had done both of the previous two summers. All of the conference work, to be published in a book, was presented at a final half-day symposium attended by the Croatian Prime Minister, the Mayor of Mostar, some SFOR troops (NATO and European Community security forces which police Bosnia) stationed in the area, and assorted local political figures.

During and after the workshop, we visited more of the region, including Dubrovnik, Ston, Split and Trogir in Croatia; and Blagaj and Sarajevo in Bosnia. We were especially fortunate in Split, where a young Croatian architecture professor whom we had met at the workshop, Niksa Bozic, showed us not only the remarkable city center, housed in Diocletian's Palace, but also the modern developments of Split III, neighborhoods which were planned as a result of design competitions

in the 1980s. We began to understand the physical impact of the various cultural waves and architectural traditions that have swept through the Balkans—Greek, Roman, Turkish, Venetian, Slavic, French, Austro-Hungarian, German, and European Modern reflected in the densely layered urban and rural landscapes. We examined the impact of heritage tourism and played tourist ourselves, and occasionally tried to forget for a while the war and its consequences . . . until we would find a grenade bobbing in the currents of a stream in Blagaj, or come across a map showing the location of shelling in Dubrovnik, or encounter the “Roses of Death” in Sarajevo—mortar craters in the street filled in with red plaster to commemorate those murdered at each location.



Fig. 7. Split III, Croatia.

The interpenetration of life and death was everywhere. How do you describe the feelings generated by strolling through city parks in Mostar and Sarajevo transformed into cemeteries . . . sitting at a sidewalk café drinking Turkish coffee, talking about flirtations between students, watching a tank belonging to the SFOR peacekeepers rumbling by the table . . . trying not to stare as one of our young drivers, and the students’ jovial host and guide to the local clubs and restaurants, figures out how to do all the things he used to do before he was used as a human shield in the war and his right arm was shattered . . . finding out that the elementary school which housed the workshop not only had bunnies and chickens being raised for food, but also 68 bodies buried in the backyard. And also, eating wonderful food on stone terraces covered in flowers as the setting sun turns limestone towers pink . . . and being welcomed into centuries-old traditional homes and given glasses of rose water to reward us for our interest . . . and being treated everywhere with courtesy and warmth and even affection.

And then we went to Turkey . . . the seat of the culture which had been under attack in the Balkans; where the houses, mosques, and other artifacts of the Ottomans originated. We traveled through a country not engaged in war, but whose culture is under attack from the forces

of modernism and global change on the one hand, Islamic fundamentalism and massive urban immigrations on the other. The trip became more clearly architectural—Aya Sofia, the Topkapi Palace, the wall of Theodosius, the Galata Tower. . . . We followed the development of the mosque as a building type: from the multi-columnar hall of the Ulucami in Bursa (1390s), through the soaring, spatially complex and powerful work of the great Renaissance architect, Sinan (in Istanbul and Edirne), to mosques from the Baroque and Victorian periods. We visited Byzantine cisterns, neighborhoods of wooden houses, thriving fish markets. We commuted each day across the Bosphorus on the network of ferries that crisscross this amazing waterway that connects the Mediterranean with the Black Sea, Europe with Asia. We shopped in the Grand Bazaar, and the Egyptian Spice Market, and the Beyazit Book Market, and the silk markets in the Hans of Bursa. We went to a sixteenth-century Hammam (Turkish Bath), and stayed at a sixteenth-century Kervanseraï designed by Sinan in Edirne (the ancient Greek city of Adrianople). And we visited Troy, Assos and Pergamon, where Greek and Roman ruins perch atop hot, wind-swept hills overlooking the ‘wine-dark’ Aegean Sea. And we visited Gallipoli, where more thousands died earlier in this century in one of the bloodiest battles of the First World War.

Bosnia was, and is, a crossroads between East and West. Our trip, while centered on the agony and rebirth of Mostar, went from Zagreb, Split, and Dubrovnik to Edirne, Bursa, and Istanbul. We saw the collision of cultures, but even more, we saw and met people and communities whose inexpressibly rich heritage comes from the intermingling of traditions and narratives. The diversity of the Balkans is a fact, despite the wars, and we came away from our journey with a mix of emotions and memories, and ultimately feeling hopeful, and enlightened.



Fig. 8. The UT students at the Old Mill restaurant, Mostar.