Intervening in Politically Turbulent Cities: Spaces, Buildings, and Boundaries

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This paper examines and evaluates public policies and strategies used in four politically turbulent cities that have been characterized by nationalistic group conflict and that have been part of significant socio-political transitions. It asks two basic questions: What is the nature of the relationship between socio-political conditions and changes to urban materiality and space? Are interventions that manipulate urban materiality and space in ethnically contentious cities capable of advancing or retarding intergroup tolerance?

I first describe scholarship involving cities and technology studies, political transitions and uncertainty, and urban malleability and obduracy. The article then focuses on case studies of Barcelona and Bilbao during and after the Spanish transition from authoritarianism to democracy and then investigates Sarajevo and Mostar in Bosnia amidst a fragile post-war transition. Findings come from one year of field research, drawing primarily on more than 100 interviews with local, national, and international officials and with non-governmental, community, and opposition group activists. I examine interventions that shape the built environment in ways that symbolize and express new political goals pertaining to openness and inclusiveness and that seek to overturn or reverse pre-transition and wartime wounds. I also investigate cases where there is spatial demarcation of new political boundaries and
how these efforts seek to recognize or neutralize the power of ethnicity in a contested city. Specific interventions examined include the design of public space, revitalization and reconstruction of urban cores and historic structures, and the redrawing of local political and administrative boundaries. A concluding section places my research findings within the theoretical and conceptual literature.

Policymakers and community leaders in each of the case cities have been exposed to periods of significant national political uncertainty and engagement in far-reaching constitutional and institutional reform and needed to cope during this political reordering with how to effectively address significant differences between identifiable nationality groups. In Bosnia’s case, this meant between the three antagonistic nationality groups of Bosniak (Muslim), Croat, and Serb, and in Spain’s case, it meant between those who argue for greater regional autonomy in places like Catalonia or Pais Vasco and those who favor a more centralized Spanish state anchored in Madrid. The case studies are examples of contested cities, wherein ethnic identity and nationalism combine to create pressures for group rights, autonomy, or even territorial separation from the state. Political control of these cities becomes contested as nationalists push to create a political system that expresses and protects their distinctive group characteristics. Whereas in most cities there is a belief maintained by all groups that the existing system of governance is properly configured and capable of producing fair outcomes, assuming adequate political participation and representation of minority interests, governance amidst severe and unresolved multicultural differences can be viewed by at least one identifiable group in the city as artificial, imposed, or illegitimate.

**Political Change and City Building**

Political transitions toward democracy—whether brought on by changes in political regime, national constitution, or through war—are excellent lenses through which to analyze the city as a socially and politically constructed material artifact. The effort to transform urban space as part of political democratization positions planning as a technical enterprise intimately connected to, and influenced by, social and political processes. This is so because, during the turbulence of political transitional uncertainty and amidst the legacy of group-based conflict, city builders and
political leaders are forced to contemplate the city as a physical artifact having explicit and potent social and political meaning. Town planning becomes illuminated as a form of technology that is, at least partially, socially shaped.

Political change stimulates urban creativity, providing an opportunity for actors to reflect upon, and depart from, existing social rules and technological artifacts. With national political transformation comes change in the composition and objectives of “city building regimes,” described by Gullberg and Kaijser as “a set of actors and the configuration of coordinating mechanisms among them which produce the major changes in the landscapes of buildings and networks in a specific city region at a given point of time.” In the two Spanish cases, democratically elected and regionalist municipal leaders took control after decades of authoritarian city administration controlled centrally by the Franco regime in Madrid. In the two Bosnia cases, the “international community” composed primarily of the United Nations and the European Union assumed responsibility for the post-war management and regulation of Sarajevo and Mostar.

Political transitions and uncertainty afford opportunities for planners and other urban professionals to break with the past and seek significant transformation of a city’s built and human landscapes. Historic examples of such transformation are largely associated with problematic outcomes. French occupation of the city of Algiers led to a colonial urban planning which reified French urbanism and control. Town planning and architecture during the transitional period of Palestinian control transplanted the Zionist nationalist enterprise onto the heretofore more “Arab” urban system of Jaffa/Tel Aviv. In more recent cases, the reconstruction of post-wall Berlin and post-war Beirut provide evidence of “willful amnesia” and collective silence on the part of political leaders, financial sponsors, and urbanists. At other times, large-scale urban intervention (such as the urban renewal program in the United States) can erase physical fabric and urban history, exposing the city as one not of permanence and continuity, but of discontinuities and upheaval. And, efforts today to recreate cities as commodities in order to attract tourist dollars and foreign investment are obliterating spaces formerly inclusive of diverse ethnic groups and income classes. Several critiques have identified specific attributes and tools of the town planning profession that empower it as an agent in transforming and disrupting urban morphology. LeVine focuses on the technical language of town planning as enabling the “discursive,
and then physical, erasure or disappearance of others’ claims or villages.” Holston calls the urban modernism that fuels contemporary urban planning an “aesthetic of erasure and reinscription.” Rabinow asserts that by the 1920s, the city had become “a more abstract space—a socio-technical environment—upon which specialists would regulate operational transformations.” In the end, the ability of planning to transform all problems of society into questions of space meant that it would be “an ideology which immediately divides up.”

Examining the public planning function during and after periods of societal uncertainty or transformation provides a relatively unfiltered view of how this function relates to axes of public and private power. Political transformation loosens the “embeddedness” of city building within established political, economic, and other value systems, producing for some limited duration increased opportunities for innovation and the creation of new city building logics and aspirations. Amidst transitional uncertainty, political forces and interests compete and position themselves to assure that any new political dispensation or movement toward democracy does not harm their interests. These competing potential centers of power may structure, use, and exploit public planning and policymaking functions in ways to assist them in establishing authority or dominance. As such, urban interventions can constitute organizational and societal adaptation to an uncertain and changing environment.

In contrast to this promise of urban malleability amidst change, there exist qualities of urban rigidity which impede material change. The physical structures of the city have fixed and obdurate qualities. This concreteness of physical stock may make urban transformation seem slower at times than the pace of national political change. The goals of policymakers in new regimes to stabilize, normalize, and transform a city may encounter as obstructions the old spatial forms and processes created before the transitional period. Analyses of eastern European socialist cities in transition to capitalism, for instance, suggest that socialist urban traits change slowly in capitalist reconstruction. Cities in economic transition from socialism to capitalism have showed varied, or “path-dependent” shifts in their physical, social, and economic restructuring. In other cases, colonial and politically inspired forms of urban planning created urban morphologies of separateness and imposed material structures and symbols that are resistant to post-colonial transformation. Urbanists in Johannesburg, South Africa today face massive economic...
and spatial disparities built into the metropolitan landscape by over forty years of apartheid engineering. In Jerusalem, the twenty years of physical partition from 1948–1967 spatially separated Jewish west and Arab east Jerusalem populations, an obstacle to ethno-nationalist integration that remains forty years later. In cases where rebuilding of war-torn cities has been attempted, policy officials engage not with a *tabula rasa*, but with urban forms and activity patterns erected both before and during urban warfare. In the rebuilding of German cities after World War II, the shape of reconstruction was influenced by long-term continuities in city-building practice dating to the early 1900s. In Beirut, efforts during the 1990s to reconstruct the debilitated city needed to accommodate forms of urbanization—such as squatting, refugee camps, and self-sufficient neighborhood networks—which sustained individuals through crises. And, in the former Yugoslavia, political and physical post-war reconstruction faces the terrible legacy of urban *ethnic cleansing* that created landscapes of demographic dominance and eradication.

**Empirical Evidence**

In the Spanish cases, I focus on the first two decades of democracy after the political transition from Franco authoritarianism to Spanish democracy was consolidated in 1979. The 1978 constitution created a quasi-federalism whereby powers are shared between the central government and the governments of seventeen autonomous communities, two of which govern the Basque Country region and the region of Catalonia. Two different regional autonomy statutes passed in 1979 granted significant regional autonomy to Catalonia and the Basque Country. This decentralization of power helped defuse regional separatism, although nationalist violence has remained a fact of life concerning the Basque issue. In the case of Bosnia, I examine the 10-year transition period after the end of the Bosnian War in 1995. Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is an independent state formed out of the hell and trauma of the 1992–1995 Bosnian War that resulted in about 100,000 deaths and nearly 2 million people internally displaced or made refugees (about one-half of Bosnia’s pre-war population). BiH is attempting, with strong United Nations oversight, to recreate itself as a confederation of two entities whose boundaries were created largely by war and ethnic cleansing. The Dayton Accords (General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia
and Herzegovina) signed in 1995 provided for the continuity of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a state but created two constituent entities of ethnically separated populations—the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (with a postwar Bosniak [Muslim]—and Croat majority) on 51 percent of the land, and Republika Srpska (mostly populated by Bosnian Serbs) on 49 percent of the land. The presence of the international community (IC) in BiH is large, most particularly the United Nations and European Union. The UN’s Office of High Representative (OHR) was, ten years after the war, still an active agent in monitoring and intervening in Bosnian politics and policymaking.

I used diverse sources of information, including field research interviews, published and unpublished materials, and quantitative urban data. The main research source was face-to-face interviews. Between April 2003 and July 2004, I interviewed 109 political leaders, planners, architects, community representatives, and academics in the four case study cities. I developed core interview lists, based on my primary field contacts, prior to the in-field research portion of the project. I identified additional interviewees after arrival based upon word-of-mouth referrals from initial discussants and academics at my host institutions. The duration of on-site field research varied from two weeks to two months. I used an interview guide that structured and customized the set of topics for each discussant, while at the same time allowing discretion on my part in the ordering and phrasing of questions. Questions were open-ended. Interviews lasted 75 minutes, on average. About 90 percent of them were audio-taped and subsequently transcribed. In about 10 percent of the cases, I used a translator to facilitate discussion. I also investigated published and unpublished government plans and policy documents, political party initiatives, implemented regulations, and laws and enabling statutes in terms of how they situated urban interventions amidst democratization and reconstruction.

Barcelona: Opening the Franco City

In April 1979, for the first time in over forty years, the city population of Barcelona elected a mayor and city council. One member of the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia became mayor and other members of that party comprised the majority on the city council. This socialist control of Barcelona city government remains until this day. Those who were opposed to the Francoist political system

1Real names of interviewees are reported with their permission.
were now brought into the new system. The momentum to engage in new urban policies after decades of political suppression was palpable. The city was ready, and beginning in 1979, Barcelona became an urban laboratory wherein a socialist strategy was applied for the first time since the 1930s. There was an acute consciousness of the urban crisis by the new administration, and “after struggling, waiting, and hoping for so long, we were in agreement as to what was needed to be done.” Because so many people who fought against the regime were now in city government, there was a remarkable urban social consensus between the new city leaders and the population at-large in terms of the need and broad outlines of how to move forward. One key participant, J. Borja, describes these early years of democracy: “It was easy for us to invent public urbanism. All intelligentsia of the left were in City Hall and this facilitated an important consensus. It was an exceptional situation.”

This unlocked democratic momentum and social consensus was applied to a daunting set of urban problems. The speculative Franco city had left the Old City and its largest district physically deteriorated and congested and had created working-class peripheral neighborhoods with vastly inadequate infrastructure and services. Further, democratization came amidst an ongoing and deep economic hemorrhaging in the urban region. In the 1978–1983 period, 100,000 jobs of all types were lost in the city, another 200,000 total jobs in its expansive suburban ring. This economic crisis created emergency social situations that the city government needed to address, yet the recession restricted the amount of public money available through taxation to fund new public initiatives. Within this context of hardship and constraint, but with a readiness to act and broad citizen support to do so, what could Barcelona architects and planners do in the early years of democracy?

A conscious strategy of small-scale, project-based interventions was employed in order to build democracy into the city landscape. The municipality completed more than 100 urban public space projects in all ten districts of the city from 1981 to 1987. Public park improvements, central plazas, and streets were constructed that could make a difference in the life of everyday Barcelonans over a relatively short time and within funding constraints. These local, small-scale interventions were seen as catalysts for the overall upgrading of the city, with public investment positioned as leverage to encourage private sector interest. In his 1985 book, Reconstruction of Barcelona, Oriol Bohigas
(director of city planning, 1980–1984) described small-scale urban projects as a strategy more useful than the abstraction of master and regulatory planning. A path-breaking master plan for Barcelona (the 1976 General Metropolitan Plan) completed earlier during the political transition was key in changing the development logic of the city by lowering the potential for speculation and over-development, but that intervention was nevertheless aimed at controlling and restricting what could be built rather than stimulating the new growth needed to counter severe economic decline and illustrate democracy’s benefits. Needed now, instead, were city interventions that would be visible, more immediate, and thus influential upon the city’s residents. What was required, asserts Bohigas was to “move from systematic but unspecific future visions to precise proposals and specific activity.” Such improvements to urban and green spaces in the early 1980s included work on urban parks, plazas and gardens, urban corridors (pedestrian and automobile improvements), large-scale parks, basic sewer and drainage services, and social, cultural, and athletic facilities. (See Figure 1.) Projects were focused on enhancing the quality of life within specific quarters.
of the city, and were spatially targeted in a way to increase the value of working class parts of the urban fabric that had been neglected by government.

In the early years of democracy, these community-specific and small-scale interventions of architects and designers were valuable in imprinting democracy upon the Barcelona landscape. There was an important public education function linked to these project interventions, wherein new democratic and cultural values could be translated to the population. As described by M. Sola-Morales, “the recovery of public spaces in the neighborhoods, the creation of new parks, and the renovation of the central city were pedagogical in their content.” This public education and political translation function for architecture had been anticipated by Barcelona urbanists in the 1960s and 1970s, with Bohigas and Solá-Morales advancing the idea that architecture could educate the people in democratic cultural values. Project interventions during the early democratic period, together with the new community rights to part of the surplus value (plusvalor) of urbanization, were able to prove that democracy was an effective way to organize collective activities and respond to urban shortages.

Residents could experience democratic ideals most particularly through the recuperation of neighborhood squares and buildings. Actions in design marked a sharp contrast between past and present; “There was a symbolic importance attached to this civic recuperation.” Primary among the foci of project interventions was improvement of public and civic space. The quality of public space was of great importance to neighborhoods—public areas could facilitate contacts among a heretofore suppressed populous; they could facilitate and provide avenues for collective expression; and they were important to the identity of the city’s working class. In this view, public space “is not sufficient, but it is necessary for democracy in the city.” The urban mixing that Franco repressed and contained through force and intimidation was now not only to be allowed under democracy, but was to be actively fostered by municipal government through changes in the built landscape.

Another significant break with the Franco past came in 1986 when Barcelona was awarded the 1992 Olympic Games. The Olympics event, and the many years of preparing for it, provided the city and urban area with the significant opportunity and resources to restructure major parts of the urban area. In contrast to the more spatially targeted benefits of the interventions during the early post-Franco years, many of these Olympic projects...
were larger and had broader citywide benefits. In formulating this strategic planning approach, Barcelona policymakers and planners looked at their own experience in small-scale interventions and extended these tactics to the larger-scale strategies now needed.

Bilbao: Contending with Social Trauma

The revitalization of Bilbao after Franco needed to occur in a “socially traumatic” context that combined the hardships of industrial crisis with the disabilities associated with political violence. The city of Bilbao and its metropolitan area of thirty municipalities make up almost 50 percent of the population of Basque Country and have been its economic powerhouse and functional center. Steel, shipbuilding, and textile manufacturing drove Bilbao’s economy for decades after the industrial revolution at the end of the nineteenth century. During the Franco years, Bilbao was artificially supported through import protection, strict anti-union laws, and the allocation of resources to Basque industrialists. When Franco and his regime died, these artificial supports were terminated and a severe crisis resulted during and after the transition to democracy. The industrial model of growth upon which Bilbao was based became obsolete, resulting in high unemployment, urban degradation, unaddressed environmental pollution, out-migration, and social marginalization.

Since 1968, Eustadi ta Askatasuna (ETA) has advocated outright independence of Basque Country from Spain and has been in armed struggle against the central state. ETA has killed over 800 persons in pursuit of its political goals of independence; its killings have had deep psychological and symbolic impact in the country. The politics of Basque nationalism was antagonistic and obstructive of assertive public interventions that would be needed to restructure and revitalize Bilbao. For instance, port and railroad facilities would likely need to be relocated in order to connect the city to the river and encourage the redevelopment of derelict industrial sites. Yet, many of these facilities were owned or run by Spanish state-controlled entities. In a circumstance where radical nationalists were assassinating Spanish officials and attacking symbols of the state, the intergovernmental cooperation needed to resurrect Bilbao was a difficult proposition. Without agreement from Spanish state authorities, Bilbao would remain a city whose best days were rooted in its industrial past.
Bilbao policymakers realized in the first decade of democracy and regional autonomy that they could turn Bilbao’s obsolescence into an opportunity to redefine the city. “What might be a handicap in other situations,” said Ibon Areso, “became a plus and advantage here because it allowed us to pursue policies that were risky and at times harsh. We didn’t have time to waste talking about political issues.” In 1987, the City Council of Bilbao drew up a plan to restructure the city to facilitate new post-industrial employment growth. Its goals included urban regeneration that would integrate the river with commercial and residential areas, increased accessibility and mobility, and the development of cultural activities as the building blocks to collective vitality. Many of these land-use initiatives involved transforming the city to a post-industrial one that used the river as a springboard for culture and public interaction. This plan identified two areas—the waterfront area (Abandoibarra) and the central city district—as priorities for redevelopment; both of these areas had significant land holdings owned by public companies operated by the Spanish central state. The General Urban Plan of Bilbao (GUPB) of 1992 maintained emphases on cultural identity as a means toward city revival, a focus on priority areas where “emblematic spaces” could be constructed, and physical restructuring as the key to socio-economic recovery.

In an atmosphere of lingering nationalistic tension between the state and region, and among interests within the region, there has been functional cooperation and consensus around the goal of physically resurrecting an aging industrial metropolis. Bilbao Ria 2000, a publicly funded limited company composed of Spanish state organizations and Basque public institutions that owned or controlled land in the project areas, has played a pivotal role in improving and then selling land for private development. The physical outcomes of these public interventions have been extensive. The port has been made larger and moved outside Bilbao city center in order to create more connections in the urban fabric. Improvements along the river have included pedestrian walkways and bridges; rail lines have been depressed and relocated with new avenues and parks in their place; and a new urban subway system has been built. The redevelopment of the Abandoibarra district along the Nervion River has been the target of many of Bilbao’s implementation and organizational tools. The area of about 86 acres is in a prime location identified as the future center of the city; in former days, it was a zone dominated by shipyards, a container port facility, and regional...
rail line. Formally begun in 1998, the Abandoibarra project will contain, when it is completed, about 200,000 square meters of mixed uses, including office, hotel, institutional, housing, and commercial along with almost 200,000 square meters of green and open areas. The total cost of urbanization in the district is estimated at about 60 million Euros; about 40 percent will come from the public sector and 60 percent from the private sector.

The early creative planning vision used in Bilbao catalyzed and integrated multiple strands of urban regeneration and provided unforeseen opportunities. The Abandoibarra plan uses as anchors two symbolic structures envisioned in the earlier 1987 plan and which have now been built at either end of the redevelopment district. During a time when the larger Abandoibarra redevelopment plan was being drafted, high-ranking Basque public officials approached the Guggenheim Foundation, which had been looking for a site to expand its holdings in Europe. The Basque officials showed them their identification of a waterfront site for a major art museum, one of the two “opportunity sites” of the 1987 city general plan. Basque leaders, against all original odds, secured an agreement with the Foundation in 1992 to build this major art museum in Bilbao. Public funding for the enterprise has been substantial—about 150 million Euros in construction costs, born largely by the Vizcaya provincial government and the Basque regional government. Backed by such strong monetary commitments, the Guggenheim began construction in 1994 and opened October 1997. The visitation level needed to recoup these large public outlays has been far surpassed in the first seven years, averaging 900,000 to 1 million annual visitors (in its first year, it drew almost 1.4 million visitors). (See Figure 2.)

The Guggenheim Museum has helped turn the corner for the city and started a momentum that continues to this day in numerous urban rejuvenation projects. It has enhanced the capacity of the city to compete internationally and to diversify economically. In addition, the Guggenheim has had iconic importance and has been instrumental in helping Bilbao reconstruct its image. The Guggenheim and other cultural improvements have moved the region toward a more cosmopolitan character with a closer relationship and openness to contemporary culture, a quality that appears conducive to advancing a moderate and non-violent Basque identity agenda. Significant urban economic development of Basque cities and towns after Franco has taken place concurrent with erosion in public support for political violence, suggesting the
possibility that reconstituting urban materiality in a conflict city may, over time, moderate entrenched antagonisms.

In Bilbao, physical revitalization and restructuring are promoting a new and transformed sense of city identity that is competing with negative industrial and political images. Urban development partnerships between local, regional, and central state levels have constituted mechanisms of cooperation and have catalyzed a dynamic urban track amidst an otherwise lagging and sclerotic regional politics. Planning and urbanism have been able to provide a space of rationality, agreement, even consensus in a society where political debate has been constrained by militant nationalism and distorted by violence.

**Sarajevo: Bounding the Post-War City**

Sarajevo is a story not of how urban artifacts affect social practices, but rather how boundary drawing and the delineation of ethnic political space influences post-war urban life. Boundary drawing creates political and spatial containers that incorporate certain people with residency access and membership rights
while excluding others outside the sphere. Even when political boundaries are subtly imprinted onto the landscape (indicated solely by simple sign markers, for instance) and thus do not have the visibility of built artifacts, they can constitute a substantial compartmentalizing and separating of material spaces and social activities.

Sarajevo today is a frontier city—an urban interstice—between opposing political territories. The boundaries between the Dayton-created Croat-Muslim Federation and Republika Srpska entities (in international language, Inter-Entity Boundary Lines or IEBLs) are drawn just outside the city’s southeastern urban neighborhoods. The drawing of this line within Sarajevo’s functional space has significant influence on the urban region’s future viability as a space of ethnic co-existence. The City and Canton of Sarajevo today are of markedly less ethnic diversity than before the war. For the Canton of Sarajevo, about 45,000 Serbs lived within its borders in 2002, compared to about 139,000 Serbs who resided in the greater urban area of Sarajevo before the war. In the city itself, today’s population is about 80 percent Bosniak Muslim and only about 12 percent Bosnian Serb (compared to approximately 50 percent and 30 percent, respectively, before the war). Sarajevo, a target during the war, was for Bosniak and Bosnian Serb political leaders a prize to hang onto after the war, and for the international community, an ideal of multiculturalism to uphold. Multiple pressures acted at cross-purposes, in the end producing new city and subnational boundaries and a resident population of strong Muslim majority.

The Dayton peace accord of December 1995 stopped the fighting but set off processes that unraveled efforts to create Sarajevo as a multicultural space within a fractured state. Amidst increased NATO military actions against Bosnian Serb locations near the end of the fighting, Serbian leader Milosevic conceded the city and portions of surrounding hills, transferring to Muslim control those territories that had been key to Muslim-Serb fighting in Sarajevo and which had been under Serb control since the start of the siege. In this “reunification of Sarajevo,” there would be the transfer over a three-month period of the districts and suburbs of Grbavica, Ildza, Hadzici, Vogosca, and Iljas—home to about 60,000 Bosnian Serbs—to the Federation. (See Figure 3) Although able to stay in the urban area throughout the war, this planned transfer awakened fear of intimidation and retribution on the part of Sarajevo Serbs. In addition, Serb military and paramilitaries, and RS officials, sent forceful messages that Serbs

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Sarajevo Canton Government Federation Ministry of Displaced Persons and Refugees

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should leave the area so as to increase the concentration of Serb population elsewhere. In efforts to maintain Serbs in a “reunified” Sarajevo, NATO Stabilization Force (SFOR) personnel were used to provide security for these to-be-transferred Serb areas. Despite these international efforts, and whether by choice or by force, what resulted was a mass exodus in early 1996 of some 62,000 Sarajevo Serbs from inside what would be the Dayton borders of Sarajevo city and its suburbs. The result would be an increasingly mono-ethnic city. Ironically, as stated by Kumar, “Sarajevo, which had so proudly resisted ethnic divide during the war and occupation, was being driven to it by reunification under the peace agreement.” Rather than creating an international administrative zone for Sarajevo, Dayton incorporated most the city’s population within Federation territory.

The ethnic homogenization of Sarajevo occurred despite heightened awareness and aspirations by the international community of the significance of the urban area to state peace-building. Just prior to the large Serb out-migration from the city, “The Rome Statement” signed by Bosniak, Croat, and Serb leaders in February 1996, asserted that Sarajevo “will be a united city” and appealed for all to stay in the city as a means toward “reconciliation and peaceful living together.” Eight months later, in October,
an agreement under the auspices of the U.N. Office of the High Representative sought to create, albeit unsuccessfully, a “State District” within Sarajevo Canton—consisting of government institutions—that would not be subject to the jurisdiction of either entity, but rather governed by Bosnia State institutions directly.

The redrawing of the political geography of Sarajevo city and region since the war highlights the tension that existed between efforts (mainly by the international community) to rebuild and maintain the city’s multiculturalism and the desire of ethnic groups to protect territory amidst the realities of nationalist animosities. Negotiations and bargains engaged in during and at the end of the war by Serb, Muslim, and Croat ethnic leaders and the international community over borders and jurisdictions produced a set of ethnically-demarcated containers within which the different ethnic groups could continue to exert power after the war. The effect of such ethnic demarcation and gerrymandering at the local level was to tighten the screws on Sarajevo City’s ability to act as an opportunity space for multiculturalism in the future. Dayton and other agreements provided little space to Sarajevo to integrate and assimilate different ethnic populations over time, submerging and quartering the city instead.

An alternative way to facilitate the maintenance of minority Serb and Croat groups in the city would have been to create municipal borders that intentionally bridged the Dayton autonomous entity boundaries. Before the war, Sarajevo City was a geographically expansive city that spanned well into what today is Serb Republic territory; in 1991, the population of this greater Sarajevo was over 500,000. If re-established after the war, such expansive entity-spanning city boundaries would have provided increased space necessary for the three groups to live in the city, over the short term “together separately” and, over the longer term, in ways that would revitalize the urban relationships and processes of the pre-war city. Instead, under Dayton, Sarajevo was jurisdictionally located within the Muslim-Croat Federation, with the urban part of the city in the Federation and the rural part in the Serb Republic. If this rural part had been included within larger, entity-spanning city boundaries, the Serbs who had since relocated there would likely feel part of Sarajevo rather than ostracized. Instead, today living outside the city borders and functionally disconnected from the urban system, “those on the Serb Republic side do not have a future under division.” Soon after the war, the area became known as “Serb Sarajevo,” indicating a psychological and territorial claim to that
part of the former city that will likely strengthen over time. The political boundary created through brutal war that is within Sarajevo’s urban sphere lacks a physical or intimidating presence; however, it is a line of separation within an urban system of linkages and it has already influenced—and will continue to do so in the future—where people live and how and where they choose to interact. Emerging from the war and ever since, the abstract yet politically potent IEBL had become real and taken on a life of its own—the reification of an ethnic boundary.

“Reunification” of the post-war city was an endeavor to support the multicultural fabric of Sarajevo, yet this “reunification” was not an ethnically neutral proposition because the Serbs to be reunified within the city would need, under Dayton, to be simultaneously incorporated into the Muslim-Croat Federation. This psychological factor spawned the substantial out-movement of Bosnian Serb population from the transferred districts and suburbs to nearby Serb Republic land and to other places in that republic. If, instead, the “reunified” city would have been a spatially expansive zone that spanned entity boundaries and thus was not fully contained within the Federation, more Serbs would have probably stayed in these neighborhoods. With expansive and spanning boundaries that marked the city as neither Federation nor Serb Republic (a “D.C. Sarajevo” model), “reunification” of the city may have occurred without the Serbian out-movement that diluted the city’s multiculturalism.

The redrawing of political space during Bosnia’s transition from wartime to diplomatic agreement has significant implications for future Bosniak-Serb-Croat relations. In a circumstance where ethnic difference has been accommodated and reinforced through the drawing of political boundaries, efforts by the international community to build a democratically shared Bosnia lack the local foundational level of democracy to build from. The diplomatic re-creation of the Bosnian state has “misplaced” the city in Bosnia’s reconstruction, suppressing its innate ability to be a symbol for all and to re-establish over time inter-ethnic relations on the ground, in the marketplaces, and in the neighborhoods. Due to Sarajevo’s physical location at the conjuncture of interspersed pre-war ethnic geographies, a Sarajevo of special government status and genuine multicultural and shared power would have helped over the long term to rebuild the centripetal forces necessary for societal reconstruction. Instead, there has been the drawing of post-war political geographies in ways that accept and will continue to reinforce centrifugal forces and separate futures.
Mostar: Continuing the War

Formerly a city where Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats intermixed spatially and functionally, post-war Mostar is a physically divided city due to the ethnic displacement of war. Muslims live primarily east of the Neretva River (with a few enclaves west) and Croats live primarily in west Mostar. Six municipalities were created by peace accords and all had strong ethnic majorities. These “ethnic municipalities” engaged for ten years in activities that ethnically fragmented public services that should be integrated and citywide. Parallelism and division were at absurd levels in Mostar in 2004. There were divided health care, educational and childcare institutions, dual urban planning and regulatory systems, and parallel public transportation, water supply, electricity, and sewage systems. The active form of war stopped in 1994, but the antagonisms that created the war remained. Primary among the spoils of the war has been the city and its collective sphere. One European official explained, “On the political side, the war still goes on.”

Amidst the severe fragmenting impulses of post-war Mostar, the IC put forth an excellent strategy—that of the central zone—for gradually integrating and normalizing a key core area of the city. The Rome Agreement and the Interim Statute created the zone in the traditional commercial and tourist center of the city, and it was to be administered by an ethnically balanced city council and administration. About one mile long and one-half mile wide, the central zone was put forth as the “the symbol and key to a unified and multiethnic Mostar.” It consisted of a common strip of land along the former confrontation line where joint federation, canton, and city institutions and administrations would be located. The central zone was to act immediately as a spatial buffer between the two sides and to indicate to both Croats and Bosniaks that no land would be allocated based on wartime positions. It would be a place of neutrality and ethnically balanced control and administration. Over time, through appropriate development, the central zone would grow like a seed and demonstrate that cross-ethnic activities could resume, first within the zone, and then hopefully in larger swatches of urban space within the “ethnic” municipalities. This was a conscious attempt to use political boundary drawing and spatial planning as means of reconstructing a city of extreme division. (See Figure 4.)

The idea for the central zone came out of contentious negotiations over post-war local boundaries. In accepting the creation
of six city-municipalities in the Mostar urban area in late 1995, the fundamental problem for the international community was where to draw the boundary between Croat and Bosniak municipalities. With progress by diplomats stalled on the size and boundaries of the central zone, urbanists used several planning-related
criteria—land availability, access to neutral highways, inclusion of cross-ethnic infrastructure, and enclosure of an equal amount of each side’s territory—as bases for placing central zone boundaries in a more rational, less political, way. An EU meeting in February 1996 (The Rome Conference) nonetheless substantially reduced the recommended size of the buffer zone and thus its potential capacity to bridge division.

The central zone, intended to be neutral space immune from the ethnic compartmentalization occurring elsewhere in the city, became in the early days a target of ethnic territorial ambitions and remained that way for ten years. The six city-municipalities that withheld power and authority from the city administration ethnically carved up the central zone and turned it, as with the rest of the urban area, into a “political space” of contested territoriality. Both sides obstructed the establishment of shared institutions intended for the central zone, including offices of the courts, police, and those of the city, canton, and federal government. Croats, more than Bosniaks, strategically built ethnically exclusive institutions in the central zone, an outcome directly opposed to the intended use of the zone as an area of joint and mixed use. Two glaring examples of ethnic intrusion into the central zone are the efforts by Croat interests to construct a massive Catholic cathedral and to build a Croat National Theater. A U.N. official called this “policy-making through land occupation,” explaining that much construction would be in place by the time the legal review by the city administration was completed.

Ethnic penetration of the central zone sabotaged a foundation needed for the long-term normalization of Mostar. In the face of ethnically entrenched and war-hardened antagonists, that same official said, “We as urbanists should have helped integrate the city quickly through the design of the central zone with public functions, coffee shops and meeting places, and mixed living areas. We had the chance, but I think we lost it.” With an urban development plan for the central zone in place early in the process, the city administration and the IC could have more effectively pursued projects of joint citywide application and directly targeted inconsistent and illegal projects. International investment in erasing the front lines of the war within the central zone—namely Santici/Milosa Street to the north and the Boulevar to the south—did not pick up until 2002. The author’s visual inspection of these areas in 2002 and 2004 showed them emerging as strange zones where donor-driven reconstructed buildings are situated next to war ruins. By 2004 about one-half of the residential
stock along Santici and about seventy-five percent of residential buildings along the Boulevar had been rebuilt. Before the war, these residential areas had a strong multi-ethnic dimension; thus, reconstruction of them as part of a return program for these former tenants would be a first step in reconstituting the semblance of multi-ethnic mixing in the city. However, it may be too late to rebuild these two streets to make a real difference in undoing the damage caused by a decade of ethnic carving up of the central zone and the larger city. International observers remain concerned that not enough has been done to prevent a re-division of the city should tensions rise in the future. Because efforts by the international community and the city administration to counter sectarian entrepreneurs have been ineffectual and tardy, ethnic separatists have likely succeeded in obstructing progress towards normalcy and ethnic tolerance.

The Mostar case shows an urbanism stopped dead in its tracks and captured by ethnic/nationalist dynamics metamorphosed from wartime. Despite the best efforts by international overseers to create a central-zone spatial buffer that would engender cross ethnic and ethnically neutral activities, there has been the establishment over a ten-year period of a faulty foundation of parallel and fragmented ethnic governance and urbanism that stunts and restricts the advancement of peace. It has been an urbanism unable to move the city and the region forward beyond the simple absence of overt conflict.

In addition to the post-war delineation of urban space, the employment of symbolic artifacts in the city’s reconstruction has also been problematic. A primary example is the rebuilding of the city’s most meaningful historic structure—the Stari Most Bridge. The effort to use historic reconstruction as a path to societal reconciliation appears viable on the surface. However, in a potently nationalistic environment, seemingly benign efforts at preserving or resurrecting history can be inflammatory.

The Stari Most Bridge—the sixteenth century emblem and symbol of Mostar—spans the Neretva River that runs through the city and was meticulously reconstructed with the help of international funding and triumphantly reopened in July 2004. International community officials and Bosniak leaders promoted the interpretation that this event constituted both a physical and metaphoric bridging of the two divided communities—Bosniaks who live mainly east of the river, Croats who reside mostly west. It was forwarded as an important part of the healing process for this ethnically divided town. Paddy Ashdown, the
then High Representative for BiH, said at the ceremonial reopening of the bridge that it was an important step towards reestablishing the “multiconfessional, multinational coexistence” in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The new Old Bridge has become a powerful symbol of the reemergence of Mostar’s multiculturalism. This perceived association of the bridge with pre-war multiculturalism and its seeming neutrality as infrastructure led international organizations and donors to view it as a sure-fire and non-contentious catalyst toward Mostar’s normalization.

However, many local Bosnian Croats felt that its multicultural symbolism is imposed and not genuine. The bridge, in fact, does not link traditional Croat and Muslim areas, but rather two halves of the old town that are both predominantly Muslim. Since it was built in the Ottoman time, the bridge is also a symbol of the Muslim nation here. Indeed, the multicultural meaning of the bridge is not a historic one, but one more socially constructed since the war to advance a vision of a post-war Mostar. Makas describes how the bridge before the war assuredly anchored the city’s historic sense of place and identity. Yet, it did not gain its multicultural symbolism until after it became a deliberate target by those pushing for mono-ethnic dominance. As part of a larger project by international organizations, governments, and media to advance post-war notions of a pluralistic Bosnia and Mostar, the bridge “was reconstructed as an intentional monument to an alleged Bosnian multicultural identity.” The local Bosnian Croat community felt antagonized by the celebratory exultations of the bridge’s reopening. “The old bridge reconstruction is not a unifying symbol for Bosnian Croats.” The old bridge, by the nature of what it was, connotes connection between people. Yet, it also was a target in the war because it was more a symbol of the Muslim nation. The rebuilding and arising of the bridge represents a complicated mixture of both the reemergence of the Muslim nation and the potential reawakening of cross-ethnic links. The bridge is not a mosque or a church and so is not an ethnically exclusive structure. However, neither is it neutral or benign in this brutalized city where preserving history, as well as planning for the future, is contentious.

The Precarious City

This comparative analysis of public policies in four contested cities finds that the link between socio/political conditions and
Interventions in the built environment is bi-directional, and that policy interventions can ameliorate, but also worsen or reinforce, original conditions of antagonism and tension.

Findings suggest that socio-political aspects are implicated—both as cause and effect—in urban policy interventions. Social reality influences the built environment and the built environment influences social reality. Public interventions at the city level are extensions of larger political and social projects; however, they shape urban materiality and space in ways that may or may not support larger political objectives. Political and social goals can be difficult to translate onto the urban landscape. As Hirst asserts, as urban spaces are “deliberately constructed by forms of power, the very properties of those spaces have consequences, and these spatial effects cannot just be read off from the forms of power themselves.” This article has illustrated how social construction of urban artifacts and spatial boundaries—in the forms of built public spaces, the revitalization of obsolete urban zones, the drawing of local political boundaries (both at citywide and district-specific levels) and the use of historic reconstruction—can create urban landscapes that can facilitate, but also impede, ethnic group relations in cities.

Urban interventions are key mediating factors positioned between the social and political projects that sponsor them and the consequences on the city’s population of these interventions. During transitional uncertainty and amidst inter-group differences, there is forced contemplation of city building as not just a neutral technical project, but one imbued with social and political content. There is a compelling need and sense of urgency during early democratic years to use urban interventions in ways to implement new political and democratic aspirations regarding inter-group tolerance. During these formative years, social and political interests engage in the technical work of city building in order to operationalize their aspirations. Whether a new governing regime is indigenous and democratically elected (as in Barcelona and Bilbao) or is the international community (as in Sarajevo and Mostar), urban interventions are important (not always successful) operational forms of the goals of the new regime: democracy, openness, stability, and/or tolerance. Urban artifacts and boundaries are socially constructed as larger political reform projects and imperatives seek to imprint themselves on the ground and in the everyday activity patterns of its residents. For new city building regimes and political leaders, the city becomes a key operational field in their efforts to actualize openness and democratic tolerance. The technical
re-working of the city becomes a crucial test and indicator of a new social and political project. Amidst a process of democratization, urban policies can constitute leading implementation edges of new public goals and, importantly, can articulate early in societal transitions how private power and public interest, and ethnic interest and citywide needs, are to interact. As stated by Abar and Bijker, city building becomes “a powerful tool in building new boundaries between the social and the technical and, therefore, in building new forms of life.”

Yet, the physical and spatial expressions of new political goals do not necessarily lead to desired outcomes. Physical and spatial artifacts afford opportunities, but can also constitute obstacles, for positively addressing issues of inter-group relations. Far from being a passive platform for the playing out of democratization in the urban sphere, the city assumes prominence as an active, at times contrary, agent and tool intertwined in the working out of social and political change. The built environment can influence social reality, as witnessed by the inclusiveness and democratic imprinting function of Barcelona’s significant assemblage of urban public spaces. Yet, the technical reworking of the city can also create obstacles in the way of social and political projects of reform, witnessed by the restrictive and ethnic-reifying consequences of actions in Sarajevo and Mostar. Democratization amidst inter-group differences does not connote specific forms and patterns of urban development; the need by urbanists to acknowledge differing group identities can require built and social landscapes that are substantially different from the urban porosity and connectivity implied by democratic pluralism. While the Spanish cases exhibit actualized potential in how urban interventions can affect positive change, the Bosnian cases reveal missed opportunities. In Sarajevo and Mostar, the dangers of not employing the urban sphere as a place of positive transformation and multiculturalism are revealed. The years ahead in these two Bosnian cities will indicate whether urbanism is capable of moving an urban system out of conditions of ethnic gridlock (Mostar) and ethnic separation (Sarajevo).

The challenge and promise of urbanism operating amidst political uncertainty is that it can create and support urban conditions that are necessary for the moderation of inter-group conflict over time. Interventions that manipulate the materiality of a city can advance new political agendas and help overcome past legacies yet may also fall prey to the multiple and contested meanings of physical objects. Redrawing of political and administrative
boundaries, meanwhile, can integrate or reunify torn geographies, yet it is a blunt instrument that can create edges to political space and distinctions between inside and outside, and which can over time reify, institutionalize, contain, and rationalize ethnic interests. Urban policy shaping of materiality and space will not turn around a society that is splintered or unraveling. Urbanism can, however, create physical and psychological spaces that complement and encourage inter-group reconciliation, exploiting and building upon peacebuilding opportunities when a city advances beyond a suspended state of ethnic division toward some greater array of spatial options. In this age of exploding intrastate conflict and volatile cities, it is increasingly necessary for international organizations, public administrators, and conflict scholars to understand why in some transitional cities urban interventions play a progressive role in shaping new societal paths while in others they do not.
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