Looking for the future in the rubble of Palmyra: Destruction, reconstruction and identity

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The destruction of the ancient ruins of Palmyra by the terrorist group Islamic State (IS) in September 2015 reverberated around the world. To an international audience already horrified by the barrage of harrowing images emerging from the conflict raging in Syria – from the near total destruction of Homs to the gruesome executions carried out by IS – this act still had the capacity to shock, despite being less bloody than other atrocities (with the tragic exception of the murder of Khaled al-Asaad, Palmyra’s chief archaeologist). Satellite images taken after the site’s destruction show how the once imposing walls of the Temple of Bel have been reduced to rubble, a single archway left to bear witness to its sad fate, the ancient city a synecdoche for a country aflame. Little wonder, then, that UNESCO head Irina Bokova publicly characterised the temple’s razing as a war crime.

Of course, this is far from the first time that such a place has become a target in times of conflict, and Palmyra is not the only site in Syria to be subjected to this treatment. In the last quarter of a century alone the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, the second Gulf War and the Northern Mali Conflict have all seen sites of important cultural heritage severely damaged by warring parties, whether directly or through a lack of care – which, as Bevan (2007) reminds us, produces just as damaging effects as a bomb or mortar blast. So why was it so important to IS to attack this site, and why does this resonate so strongly with the rest of the world? By situating the destruction of Palmyra within wider thinking about the relationship between the built environment and notions, such as collective memory and identity, this brief overview seeks to present one way of answering these questions. What is more, it also looks ahead to a time after conflict in Syria, and asks what happens next to places like Palmyra? Once the fighting has ended, so begin the discussions about how to rebuild. Far from being apolitical, the reconstruction of Palmyra (and other sites across the country) will almost certainly be just as controversial, and just as central to the forging of a new national narrative and identity as its destruction has been.

The role of the built environment in solidifying, transmitting and reaffirming the collective memory of groups has been widely explored in geographical literatures (Johnson, 1995, 2002; Mitchell, 2003; Forest and Johnson, 2002; Rolston, 2010), which has been the case since the publication of seminal works, such as Halbwachs’s Legendary Topography of the Gospels of the Holy Land (1925 [1992]) and Nora’s Realms of Memory (1996 [1989]). In this understanding places like Palmyra, their very stones and spaces, are imbued with memory by the successive generations who interact with them, each seeking to utilise their perceived solidity and timelessness to lend a sense of permanence to their own narratives of memory and identity. Both Connerton (1989) and Nora (1996) offer rich discussion of this, with Nora identifying the “material, symbolic and functional” sites, or lieux de mémoire, which house the complex network of collective memories underpinning a given community (Nora, 1996: 14). Although to Nora these sites need not be physical, Connerton underlined that places in

the built environment are especially attractive components of a framework of collective memory by virtue of their perceived stability – what better way to underpin your community’s claim to a specific, unbroken lineage than by grounding it in something as solid and seemingly durable as the buildings around us? Having stood since the 1st century AD, the ancient city of Palmyra was a fine example of Huyssen’s (2003) urban palimpsest – a place where layer upon layer of social memory has been built up over time, each new narrative inscribed over the last, until it becomes commemoratively overdetermined.

To destroy such a place, then, is to do more than simply tear down walls and columns, but to take aim at the memories – and by extension identities – that they represent and reproduce. The razing of Palmyra was a direct attack on the memories that had crystallised there – those that recalled a diverse and multicultural place at odds with the extremist and monocultural vision advanced by IS. As Professor Whitmarsh (2015) wrote in The Guardian, the city “offers antiquity’s best counterexample to Isis’s fascistic monoculturalism”, and was therefore a clear target of their violence. Whilst representatives of IS have explained their vandalism (and looting) of ancient sites as a response to the idolatry and forbidden images they perceived there, in fact there is another meaning to these acts. The attack on Palmyra attempted to erase the physical evidence that a multicultural society once thrived in Syria, denying a history that runs counter to the beliefs of IS. In such cases Bevan (2007) argues that “architecture takes on a totemic quality” (2007: 8), standing as a physical representation of the community or ideal that the aggressor is seeking to erase from the landscape.

If it is clear why the IS were so keen to destroy Palmyra, the question remains of why this one act amongst so many atrocities being committed in Syria struck such a nerve with external observers. Perhaps this too can be attributed to the commemorative function and symbolism of such an ancient place? We inscribe our memories in the buildings and spaces around us – be they monumental or mundane – in order that they might outlive us and be transmitted to future generations. By tying our collective memories to the bricks and mortar of our physical surroundings, we lend a perceived permanence and solidity to these memories, and therefore to our group identity (Miszta, 2003; Connerton, 1989). It is a kind of immortality that the individual cannot hope to attain. To see this torn down, then, is shocking. It unsettles our expectation that by using the environment around us to remember who we are we will succeed in making this permanent. If IS can so easily set dynamite under the memories of diversity, multiculturalism and peaceful coexistence built into the columns and courtyards of Palmyra, then who is to say the same could not happen to our own commemorative touchstones, wherever they may be (Forest and Johnson, 2002). The destruction of Palmyra is deeply troubling, then, not only because it underlines IS’s intention to stamp out all traces of Syria’s previous diversity in favour of their particular brand of extremism, but also for the way it upsets observers’ faith that their memories and identities will live on through the buildings and spaces around them.

Could it be, though, that the toughest test for Palmyra is yet to come? Reconstruction naturally follows on the heels of destruction – in many respects they are two sides of the same coin – and it seems unthinkable that a site as valuable as Palmyra (both in terms of heritage and potential future tourist revenue) will not be rehabilitated in some way once the fighting finally ends. Indeed other war damaged heritage sites, such as Mostar’s Stari Most or Warsaw’s old town, have been unveiled as emblematic centre-pieces of their country’s post-
war recovery. Of course, not everyone has welcomed the way these projects turned out – Warsaw’s postwar rehabilitation was decried by some as “Disney fabrication” (see Harbison, 2015: 209), whilst the rebuilt Stari Most has been labelled a “simulacrum” or “prosthetic” that fails to acknowledge the violence which took place there (Greer, 2010: 130).

These criticisms hint at an important point – physical reconstruction after conflict or natural disaster is no simple process. Although in the past it has often been presented as a technocratic undertaking, the deeply political nature of urban reconstruction is increasingly being acknowledged (Charlesworth, 2006). In fact, the reconstruction of Palmyra will be just as bound up with questions about identity and memory as its destruction has been. Rebuilding culturally and commemoratively significant buildings can be an act of resistance for the community or communities, which have been under attack. This can explain the swift reconstruction of Warsaw, discussed above, after the Second World War, or Palestinian refugees’ insistence on rebuilding the exact street patterns of their ruined neighbourhoods in Nahr al-Bared, as communities seek to fight back against efforts to erase their memories, and therefore identities, from the urban fabric (Bevan, 2007; Hassan and Hanafi, 2010). To rebuild Palmyra would be an act of resistance against the totalising narrative of IS, one that would reclaim physical space in the public realm for a different memory and narrative of Syrian identity. In this respect the process of physical reconstruction cannot take place without reference to the psychosocial reconstruction of the built environment and the communities that use it. The act of remaking a place physically, when undertaken in an open and inclusive manner, can and indeed should be an important step towards remaking communities shattered by conflict or disaster (Charlesworth, 2006; Clarke et al., 2010; Campanella, 2006).

However, this is perhaps an overly idealised view of the reality of the reconstruction process. Seen through a different lens, the destruction and reconstruction of urban spaces can be viewed as two sides of the same coin. Both are concerned with achieving specific political aims and exercising power; power over and through space. This understanding of destruction and reconstruction echoes that proposed by Kirsch and Flint (2011), who caution against the “false dichotomy” between war and peace. They use the example of the Reconstruction era that followed (and overlapped with) the American civil war to insist that reconstruction can in fact be viewed “as a process of conflict and of militarised power” (Kirsch and Flint, 2011: 3). Who has the right to control the reconstruction process will largely define what kind of place is remade in Palmyra, which memories and identities are made concrete when (and if) its arches and columns rise again. The economic, social and political capital needed to take control of the reconstruction process means that this will likely be driven by stakeholders drawn from national elites, and reflective of their values and memories. Jordan’s (2006) work on “commemorative entrepreneurs” for instance offers us an interesting discussion of this phenomenon, whilst Harrowell (2015) goes further in demonstrating how occurs in a post-conflict context. In her work on reconstruction and commemoration in the Kyrgyzstan city of Osh following the 2010 riots there, Harrowell demonstrates how the municipal authorities, led by the powerful and charismatic Mayor Melis Myrzakmatov, used post-conflict reconstruction activities to promote an exclusionary ethnic Kyrgyz identity in the city, which had formerly been noted for its multicultural nature. Such an outcome is in stark contrast to the inclusive dual process of physical and psycho-social reconstruction envisaged by Charlesworth. Instead, just as the destruction of Palmyra has served the narrative of those in
power now (IS), its reconstruction would bolster the narrative of memory and identity of whomever controls the site when hostilities finally come to an end.

It is not necessary to travel too far in the region to see examples of this trend at work. The urban fabric of Beirut, in neighbouring Lebanon, suffered severe damage during the country’s long civil war and has been the subject of significant efforts to rebuild. And yet Nagel (2000) noted that reconstruction in post-civil war Beirut was largely concerned with the reconstitution of a commercially successful space in the city centre. This space would be unaligned with any one of the diverse ethnic or religious groups that makes up Lebanese society, rather promoting a seemingly inclusive ‘Phoenician’ identity. Yet, she notes that this is not actually as neutral a term as they might have hoped. The company charged with the redevelopment of downtown Beirut, Solidere, even preserved heritage sites uncovered during the reconstruction process, recognising their potential use in underpinning the identity they have tried to build. In contrast, this new urban landscape is silent about the conflict, leading her to conclude that “Phoenician identity will most likely be salient only to the small segment of the population privileged enough to live and work in the reconstruction zone” – that is the very elites with the power to drive the reconstruction process in the first place (Nagel, 2000: 228). Although the city centre of Beirut obviously differs in a great many respects to the ancient site of Palmyra, it is not difficult to imagine a similar dynamic playing out there.

So what might the future hold for Palmyra? The world has wept over the loss of this treasure of the ancient world, but the story does not end there. Although it may be difficult to see the end of the conflict in Syria at the current time, that day must come. In fact the razing of Palmyra might better be understood as the beginning of the next page in its storied history. It may seem counterintuitive, but the post-conflict period often presents a moment of opportunity to ‘build back better’ – a challenge that can encompass everything from improvements in the construction practices, to the reconstruction of more sustainable, equitable or peaceful places (Charlesworth, 2006). At that time the question of reconstruction is brought to the top of local authorities’ agenda for action as communities’ demands coincide with the attention of external donors and agencies – on hand to provide money and expertise to aid the reconstruction effort, at least until their attention turns to the next crisis (Ferguson, 2010; Amaratunga and Haigh, 2011).

The form that this reconstruction will take is as yet unknown. If Palmyra is rebuilt in an inclusive manner, one which allows all stakeholders to participate freely and openly (akin to Habermas’s ideal speech situation), it could be a stirring, and potentially healing, act of resistance to the violence perpetrated against the site, and against Syria as a whole. The remaking of this ancient place, so loaded with memory and meaning, could underpin the symbolic renaissance of the multicultural identity that IS has sought to destroy. And yet the experiences of other places ruined by war, both ancient and modern, suggest another outcome is also quite possible. In this case Palmyra’s reconstruction would serve to give legitimacy to the narrative of memory and identity of whichever elite group emerges from the conflict able to marshal the resources and power to remake it in their own image. No matter the path taken, however, when reconstruction does begin there it will merit just as much passionate interrogation by the wider global and academic community as the site’s destruction has produced. When Palmyra is remade it will be more than just a testament to
the country’s rich history – it will bear witness to Syria’s future, and the kind of identity being built there. We would do well to look to its stones to see what story is being written there.

References


