

THE POLITICS OF HERITAGE



Beirut

Briefing Paper 8

The Politics of Heritage:

Why memory in divided cities impacts upon the future

Urban conflicts are often rooted in competing claims to a city's past, and heritage sites can become central points in divided cities due to their powerful symbolism and the strong emotions they evoke. People mark their contested past not just at such sites, but also with events like parades and demonstrations, and through more spontaneous expressions like graffiti. During armed conflict, heritage sites can become key targets, serving to inflict emotional and psychological wounds on the 'other' and gain the attention of the international community. Destruction of a heritage site or unrest at a commemorative event can be the final straw in the descent towards all out violence. When sites and events become linked, they can act as hotspots of contention around which even minor changes in use, interpretation, or access can spur the outbreak of clashes.

Heritage sites and events are pivotal in how divided cities are perceived and affect what is remembered or forgotten. Memory battles are waged through the political

control of memorials, museums, commemorations and archaeological sites. In contested cities interpretations of the past regularly serve the needs – often partisan – of the present. Even in acute crises, heritage is not an unnecessary luxury, and Conflict in Cities (CinC) concludes that if governments, international bodies and peacemakers are serious about conveying messages of a shared future, such sites and events must be used more effectively to tell more complex stories, including those of minority groups.

Historical narratives legitimise political agendas

The politics of heritage affects not only public sites and events but also personal memories. What is remembered and what is forgotten profoundly shapes the way that the histories of contested cities are constructed, often overwriting complicated and nuanced pasts with nostalgic or reductive images. Memory can shape the way the city is experienced by those who have lived

Key findings for policy

- **The political power of heritage needs to figure in any attempts at conflict resolution.**
- **The conventional approach to heritage management, is to preserve 'safely dead' sites. Instead, heritage sites should be thought of as living parts of local political ecologies with connections to the landscape and everyday practices.**
- **Heritage conservation can be strengthened by links to the improvement of social amenities such as housing, sanitation and water supply.**
- **Suppression of partisan events and sites is often unrealistic and ineffective; rather events and sites expressing multiple points of view need to be considered.**
- **Heritage in contested areas should be monitored more closely by international bodies, with subcontractors made properly accountable for their activities. Local groups as well as national governments need to be consulted.**

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through conflict, as well as their descendants. For example, the challenge facing Lebanese society is not whether to remember or forget the war, but rather how historical memory can enable its diverse communities to better understand what divides and unites them.

For dominant groups, memory is a means of consolidating power and controlling meaning. Archaeology, historical sites, and heritage are often used to legitimise authority over key sites. Since 2000, archaeology in Jerusalem has been subcontracted on a large scale to Jewish nationalist groups such as El'Ad. At the same time, the Islamic Movement has identified itself as Islam's heritage guardian in its highly politicised restoration of the Marwani Halls in Jerusalem's al-Aqsa Mosque. In doing so it has diminished the authority of the longstanding Waqf Administration. Even reconstruction of an entry ramp to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount has caused Israeli and Palestinian groups to come to blows.

In Vukovar there is a profound asymmetry in the preservation of heritage, with priority given to Croat buildings whilst Serb heritage is ignored, neglected or 'neutralised'. For subordinate or minority groups, heritage has become a rallying call for resistance and defiance,



The annual procession commemorating the fall of Vukovar draws thousands of Croats from across the country. Croatian military personnel are joined by civilians as they march through the city centre to the 'Homeland War' Memorial Cemetery. Twenty years after the siege the main street remains scarred by war.

and may be part of the struggle of some groups to maintain a presence in the city. Thus, such heritage work is more often about recent history and the protection of living communities.

The past serving the present

In contested cities memorial structures serve the needs of the present in a much more active way than in other cities. They can act as territorial boundary markers and discourage the presence of rival groups, or as repositories that collect and highlight immediate struggles. In Belfast and Derry murals are often site-specific, focusing on events that are important to the resident community and performing an internal didactic function. Elaborate murals or memorial gardens are located within communities where they are less prominent as boundary markers, vulnerable to destruction by outside groups.

War traces and remnants of conflict in Beirut are used by young people (who have no memory of the conflict itself) to explain continuing confrontations and contemporary everyday struggles of segregation, prejudice, and mistrust. Vukovar's memorials are used as boundary markers, demarcating territory and dominance. A series of 'Homeland War' memorials commemorating Croats are intentionally made visible to Serb communities. Thus, the erection of memorials can serve to extend conflict by proclaiming the exclusive victimhood of certain groups, or reinforcing ethnic divides.

Even when physical boundaries are removed they can remain in people's memories. Some residents of Berlin are so influenced by their memories of the divided city that they are still reluctant to use today what had been out of bounds before reunification. This underlines the difficulty of reuniting the city once it has been divided. In Nicosia, many young Cypriots' experience of the city is limited to certain places, and marked by the avoidance of areas at the edges of the Buffer Zone. Such neglected places are seen as legacies of a conflict that they did not personally experience, but that influences their use of the city today.

Archaeological excavation and preservation practices can serve as vehicles of forgetting, given that more recent cultural deposits are invariably destroyed in the process of reaching remains that are considered more valuable. El'Ad's selective archaeology presents the



Palestinian forms of confronting and resisting the Separation Barrier in Jerusalem include graffiti, protest art, and commercial advertisements. Such oppositional practices employ the wall as both a site of public contention as well as a space to be reclaimed. However, we might ask whether this serves to make the wall seem a more permanent and normal feature of urban life whilst encouraging the further encroachment on such Palestinian space by Western graffiti artists and Israeli left-wing activists.

Palestinian neighbourhood of Silwan as the city of the biblical King David. Its popular visitors' centre embodies a one-sided and manipulated view of the past, which appeals to the limited knowledge of the foreign tourists who visit in great numbers and to the collective amnesia of the local Jewish population. Centuries of Palestinian habitation are discarded, and homes standing in the way of the archeological site are expropriated in favour of what is presented as Israel's national interest.

Commemorative events and ceremonies can highlight differences both between and within urban factions. The Marching Season sometimes results in violence between different groups, yet is a firmly established part of the Belfast calendar. On the other hand, the Republican Easter 1916 commemorations serve as a means of promoting a political agenda. They highlight internal differences over the direction of the Republican movement as different factions hold separate ceremonies at the same site, but at different times. In Vukovar the annual 18 November commemoration in the city (marking the fall of the city in 1991) is attended mainly by Croats who live elsewhere. Acts of vandalism and violence on those days, such as damage to Serb properties, are usually committed by these non-Vukovarians.

The need for multiple perspectives

While heritage sites can be commandeered to broadcast ethno-nationally exclusive meanings and portray particularistic visions of the past, they also retain the potential to reveal alternative shared or pluralistic pasts and encourage shared futures. This can be difficult

where control of the city is contested and heritage sites represent biased views. Many contested cities feature museums of national struggle, which present widely divergent and often biased histories. When different groups hold claims to the same places, it is important that the contested nature of these sites is clear. Two major points arise here: firstly, despite their self-representation, no group is entirely homogenous and not all members of any one ethnic, national or religious group will agree with extreme views that might be expressed in a monument, museum or event. Secondly, when sites or events express partisan views, it is not always feasible to transform them into 'balanced' representations expressing all points of view. They will need to be judged upon whether they regularly provoke violence. The expression of other, counterviews in different places may help to balance the situation and present different opinions.

Where possible, more unified and nuanced narratives may be integrated into public discourse and education. In Nicosia, a considerable effort has been made to present a unified picture of the city's heritage; the Nicosia Master Plan has seen restoration of historical buildings including churches and Ottoman mosques on both sides of the city, accompanied by a guide book and a walking route that brings these sites together. Heritage education is a valuable way of promoting a shared understanding of the city, and visits to museums and sites, guided by representatives of different communities, can help to ensure exposure to other points of view.

Besides working with state representatives, international

heritage organisations must also coordinate with local organisations. This involves more than simply contracting heritage work out to local agencies or private groups; rather, views must be sought from diverse local groups before decisions are made about heritage.

The political nature of heritage, archaeology and the practices of conservation in divided cities can make the work of international organisations like UNESCO, which depends upon support by governments, extremely difficult. The shortcomings of such arrangements are demonstrated by UNESCO's unprecedented recognition of Palestine in 2011, which altered its relations with Israel and resulted in the loss of US funding.



Forming part of Berlin's network of memorials on Wilhelmstraße's 'History Mile', the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe stands for the troubled nature of the Germans' ways of remembering their darkest hour.

Further reading

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'Conflict in Cities and the Contested State' explores how divided cities in Europe and the Middle East have been shaped by ethnic, religious and national conflicts, with particular reference to architecture and the urban as a setting for everyday activities and events. It is concerned with how cities can absorb, resist and potentially play a role in transforming such conflict. The main research sites are Belfast and Jerusalem, with supplementary enquiry into other divided cities including Berlin, Beirut, Brussels, Kirkuk, Mostar, Nicosia, Tripoli (Lebanon) and Vukovar. This multi-disciplinary project is led by three UK universities - Cambridge, Exeter and Queen's Belfast, with an international network of partners. It is funded by the Large Grant Programme of the Economic and Social Research Council of the UK (RES-060-25-0015). © Conflict in Cities, November 2012; updated by © Centre for Urban Conflicts Research, 2019; www.urbanconflicts.arct.cam.ac.uk. Grateful acknowledgement is made to ARUP London for their support. This material is offered free of charge for personal and non-commercial use, provided the source is acknowledged. For commercial or any other use, prior written permission must be obtained from Conflict in Cities. In no case may this material be altered, sold or rented.

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