The City as a World in Common: Syncretic Place-Making as a Spatial Approach to Peace

Gruia Bădescu

Center for Cultural Inquiry & Zukunftskolleg, University of Konstanz, Konstanz, Germany

ABSTRACT
This article investigates the relationship between spatial reconfigurations and peace by examining the practice I call syncretic place-making, identified in cities experiencing conflict. I suggest that this spatial practice reflects the promise of Hannah Arendt’s political vision of a world in common, materialized in the city. I discuss architectural conceptualizations such as the Cypriot 2021 Venice Biennial entry and theorize from architectural practices of resistance identified in Sarajevo, defining syncretic place-making as a process of drawing from multiple traditions to celebrate coexistence in space. The article reflects on both the potential and challenges that such place-making has for conflict cities.

KEYWORDS
Cities; space; peace; conflict; architecture; syncretism

Introduction
In the aftermath of war, as well as in situations of prolonged conflict, a common challenge is to deal with the destruction of the built environment. From homes to infrastructure, from places of worship to those of work, conflict-related damage to architecture impacts society on many levels, be it immediate need or prolonged distress. Architectural reconstruction has the task of addressing landscapes of devastation and restore buildings for a wide array of human activities. Concomitantly, these societies undergo often complex post-war reconstruction processes of social and political institutions. Therefore, interventions in space such as post-war architectural reconstruction often occur at the same time as statebuilding, peacebuilding, and other forms of international intervention in conflict contexts. This article suggests that the latter can engage more with the former: spatial interventions\(^1\) in the form of place-making practice can play a role in peacebuilding in cities alongside other socio-political and economic forms of involvement.

Peace and conflict studies have seen important work calling for urban peacebuilding and spatial engagements with peace (Heathershaw and Lambach 2008; Björkdahl 2013; Björkdahl and Gusic 2013; Bjorkdahl and Buckley-Zistel 2016; Bjorkdahl and Kappler 2017; Gusic 2019). Nevertheless, there is also an increasing recognition that spatial reconfigurations can also continue conflict by highlighting divisions, emphasizing power hierarchies, and highlighting the spatial presence of particular groups, which
This article connects with the aim of the special issue to investigate where peace ‘takes place’ by examining the potentiality of architectural place-making practice for peacebuilding in urban settings. I shift the attention of the spatial turn in peace and conflict studies (Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel 2022) from a focus on territory and the control of space to architecture and place-making. Urban space and architecture, through the meanings ascribed to them by various actors, play important roles in shaping forms of peace. As a background of human existence, architecture communicates meaning (Vesely 2004) according to frames of interpretation that are embedded in societal conditions (Koepnick 2001). Its destruction and reconstruction during war are particularly meaningful for communities (Herscher 2010; Bevan 2007). In the aftermath of war or in situations of prolonged conflict, the question is what potential architecture has to challenge power dynamics in urban conflict situations rather than merely mirror them. This article is concerned with the materiality of peace through reshaped places, as well as with the spatial imaginaries of peace as ignited by place-making practice. I suggest that actors concerned with peacebuilding, including international bodies interested in intervention and statebuilding, should pay more attention to the spatial dimension and the place-making processes in conflict areas. As Bátora et al. (2020) argue, a space approach that is solely based on institutional logics of territorial sovereignty should be replaced by scenarios that prioritize development. Moreover, the focus of this article on design and place-making echoes the call from political scientists Austin and Leander (2021) for more engagement with design in the international social sciences. In this article, I highlight the potential, as well as the challenges, of a particular approach to places that has emerged from design practice, echoing a model of transformative politics grounded in the moral philosophy of Hannah Arendt.

A spatial, place-making approach to urban peacebuilding is concentrated not only on the materiality of architecture, but also on the sociality and the political promise of the city. I argue here that the city and its spaces constitute what Arendt discussed as the ‘world in common’, which binds together people in shaping a common polity. In a conflict situation, the city can offer the possibility of a common world. I will thus examine the promises and limitations of an approach which spatializes the ‘world in common’, drawing on place as unifier and catalyst of coexistence: syncretic place-making, which shapes spaces by blending multiple reference points and traditions existing in a place. I first introduce Arendt’s thinking on the world in common and I highlight the promise of the city and its space in conflict situations. Second, I examine the approach of place-making in architecture, scrutinizing its possibilities to contribute to peacebuilding. I refer to examples from architectural design, such as the Cypriot entry to the 2021 Venice Biennial, in the way they conceptualize architecture as the framework of living together. I then move to spatialize the world in common through conceptualizing from the architectural agencies of one such city, Sarajevo, where non-hegemonic practice suggests the potential of what I define as syncretic place-making. I highlight, however, the limitations and challenges of this approach, which suggests hope but also the need to engage with the broader socio-economic processes at play.

One key premise of this article is that the relationship between spatial interventions such as reconstruction and peacebuilding needs to be situated in specific contexts. Since 2008, I worked in a variety of post-war urban situations to examine how architects...
and planners respond to conflict in their design and planning work, to identify practices that engage with space for peace, as well as on what is the impact of such architectural reconfigurations on residents’ perceptions and on everyday peace. A first suggestion is that urban reconstruction should be approached differently in cases where the source of destruction is internal to the domestic society from those where it is external. The challenge of reconstruction for peacebuilding is very different in rebuilding cities after an external attack – urban recovery after the Second World War, for instance, Belgrade after the 1999 NATO bombing, or the ongoing invasion of Ukraine – rather than in reconstruction contexts where actors of destruction coinhabit within the state – like after the civil war in Lebanon (1975-90) or the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) (1992–95). This does not mean, however, that reconstruction after external attacks functions in simple political frameworks: different constellations of narratives of victimhood, responsibility, blaming, and frustration have featured in the background of reconstructions in Germany after the Second World War or Serbia after 1999, for instance (Bădescu 2019a). Nevertheless, the predicament of places where conflict featured local actors on opposite sides who co-inhabit space is also connected to the challenge of dealing with a difficult past and a tense present within the same, or juxtaposed, space.

In this article, I discuss the situation of cities which experience conflict related to in-state actors and where there is a form of cohabitation and co-spatiality between different groups. Be it divided cities or cities in contested states, these cities feature diverse groups and allegiances, which either function in spaces used by all or, in the case of ‘divided cities’, often in segregated spatialities. Nevertheless, as research in such cities has shown, even in so-called divided cities, there are various degrees of mixing and copresence in urban space (Conflict in Cities 2012a; Lepp 2022). While conflict is part of the urban condition everywhere (Pullan and Baillie 2013), in ethnonationally contested cities, conflict manifests itself in everyday practices and division is routinized (Gusic 2019; Gusic 2022), with Baillie (2013) discussing such cities as suspended in a ‘conflict-time’. In these cities, the legacy of the past, as well as the transformation of conflict, erode the possibilities of moving further and undermine the possibility of a common political project. Nevertheless, the city and its space can also offer a promise: they constitute the world that residents of various backgrounds who experienced conflict have in common.

The article draws from 14 months of field research conducted between August 2012 and February 2019 in Sarajevo, fieldwork and research visits in other cities experiencing division and conflict, most notably Beirut, as well as research visits at the 2021 Venice Architecture Biennial themed ‘How will we live together’. Urban fieldwork included a variety of methods, engaging with sites and buildings, their histories, as well as the accounts of various actors involved in reconstruction. In Sarajevo, it included architectural analysis of sites and buildings, archival research, semi-structured interviews, as well as a continuous immersion in city spaces and everyday life through participant observation. I interviewed 23 architects, planners, and heritage specialists and organized in May 2014 a one-week urban design workshop with an international student body at the Faculty of Architecture, with the support of the Centre for Displaced Persons and Refugees. Finally, participant observation and hundreds of interactions, conversations, and open-ended interviews with local residents over a total period of 11 months made me engage with Sarajevo’s everyday life and spaces, with local perceptions and narratives, framing the study in a lived experience of place.
Urban space as a common world

Societies that have experienced conflict and political violence face the challenge of dealing with a difficult past. Scholars of dealing with the past often invoke the moral philosophy of Arendt, based on her writings on repair, truth, and justice (Schaap 2005). However, Arendt’s thinking can also illuminate a spatial perspective on peacebuilding: her writings on the world in common suggest the potential of space, in particular urban space, to bring together actors in a political project. Politics was for Arendt primarily based on ‘coexistence and association’ (2005, 93), involving not only the intangible interaction between people but also tangible (urban) artefacts which structure the world, reflection which Arendt deemed a ‘spatial thought’ (1995, 79).

For Arendt, the world in common (‘a world common to ourselves and others’ (Arendt 1995, 13)) is at the background of her political thought. The public sphere, the essential condition of politics for Arendt, starts from the world in common, which is described in spatial terms like the ‘interspaces between men in all their variety’ (Arendt 1995, 31). Arendt (2006, 52) describes the world in common as a table around which people are sitting:

To live in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.

The common world is a precondition of publicness and working together. It is always in the background. As such, it mirrors the understanding of architecture and urban space in architectural theory as a context, a stage of human existence.

The durability of urban space also supports its role to sustain the world in common: ‘If the world is to contain a public space, it cannot be erected for one generation and planned for the living only; it must transcend the life-span of mortal men’ (Arendt 2006, 55). Cities and their intended durability can thus constitute such stages of public life. Arendt (2006, 65) even traced the emergence of the common world in ‘concrete tangibility’ in the rise of the city-state, connecting cities to the achievement of the world in common.

The main difficulty of modern society is the fact that the world that the people have in common ‘has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them.’ (Arendt 2006, 53). She likens that to the table where people are sitting suddenly disappearing. In conflict situations, dissension, animosity, and the loss of trust undermine the world in common in its social dimension. Yet the destruction of urban space thus leads to an actual physical erosion or even annihilation of the world the people have in common.

One way to respond to the erosion of the world in common in conflict situations is to recover this tangible materiality. This scenario envisions the reconstruction of what was lost, the world in common that people are mourning. After destruction in cities like Sarajevo and Beirut, many voices spoke with nostalgia about the cityscape and the social worlds that vanished. Some called for a restorative reconstruction to recreate this lamented world (Bădescu 2021). Nevertheless, others objected to the return to a previous cityscape which harboured problems that led to conflict, inequalities, and oppressions and called for a new urban project mirroring a new socio-political project. Others pointed to reconstruction as a mere way to improve cities that also had functional issues before
their destruction. As such, the destruction of architecture has been thought to be an opportunity – from the architects and planners of the Second World War, to people who could be happy to see infrastructures and architectures considered oppressive or unfit gone. In this case, reconstruction can be an opportunity to bring forward another world in common. Consequently, the post-war world in common can be a restored old one, a reimagined new promise, or actually the societal debate about the vision to be chosen for the city.

The palpability of architecture and urban space makes it a common reference point in situations where narratives and understandings of conflict are often fragmented, opposed, cancelling each other. As Arendt (2006, 57–58) wrote,

Under the conditions of a common world, reality is not guaranteed primarily by the ‘common nature’ of all men who constitute it, but rather by the fact that, differences of position and the resulting variety of perspectives notwithstanding, everybody is always concerned with the same object.

The city and its space, a matter of concern for all its residents, can thus bring together people with different perspectives.

The city is a place which can form loyalties and responsibilities beyond the divisions that shape conflict. It can thus be such a world in common. Urban reconstruction and spatial engagements at the urban level can support such shaping of worlds of meaning. In cities destroyed by external agents, reconstruction as a common project is easy to imagine. However, in cities where conflict is connected to internal societal faultlines, shared visions are harder to attain. There, Arendtian views of the ‘world in common’ are at first glance difficult to materialize. Nevertheless, spatial interventions provide such opportunities. One possibility is participatory processes, explored in some of the literature on conflict cities. Participation is key for building trust, and as Morrow et al. (2011, 67) write, ‘a shared future depends on more than making deals between old enemies … it requires … to make a new relationship where old enemies become partners and friends.’ The collaboration between local architects, planners, policy makers, residents, and academics in divided cities has been shown to be able to build trust through working for a shared vision (Charlesworth 2006, 124–127).

While participation as a social practice has contributed to help bridge people for a common future, I interrogate here the role of spatial practice, including design and place-making. Drawing from the practices I encountered in the field which I will discuss below, I suggest that place-making, through the creation of an open-ended sense of place and belonging, can also contribute to the construction of a world in common.

Responding to unpredictable cycles of destruction and reconstruction, architecture in post-war and ongoing conflict situations is often reactive. In order to avoid unnecessary losses, architecture becomes different from both the mainstream as well as creative and avant-garde forms. It is turned inward; it is cautious and defensive. In their study of architecture after conflict in Northern Ireland, Morrow et al. (2011, 60) wrote:

buildings turned inwards and facades became ‘controlled’, sculpted to resist and able to shut down at the first sign of trouble. Glazing was laminated, frames thickened and shutters expressed. Belfast’s streets lost their ad hoc, casual embrace of former days and became instead an equivalent of an architectural hard-shoulder … Clients remain wary of lightweight, transparent alternatives, although there are some notable exceptions.
According to the Northern Irish architects, the dearth of creativity caused by fears and desires for safety leads to an incapacity to move forward. Only by embracing a creative approach is conflict dealt with in a constructive way, thus providing ways for healing (Morrow, Mackel, and FitzGerald 2011). The last decades have seen the re-emergence of place-making as an approach to spatial reconfigurations that focuses on the character of places; can that be a constructive approach for peacebuilding as well?

**Place-making for peace**

The practice of place-making is focused on an understanding of ‘place’ through the lens of its character and the experience it can bring to the user. As opposed to ‘space’, regarded as neutral and abstract, place is imbued with meaning, carrying signs and traces (Tuan 1974; Bachelard, Jolas, and Stilgoe 1994), and acting somehow as a condensation of historical events and memory (Assmann 2011; Assmann 2018). In architecture, the emphasis on the character of a place is connected to the phenomenological turn which gained traction in the late 1970s, which was interested in the experience of places, their character, and shaping designs that provided the resident or the viewer a sense of place (Norberg-Schulz 1996).

The practice of place-making emphasizes the creation of places with character. Its contemporary popularity has to be understood also as a reaction to the dominant practices of spatial interventions of the twentieth century, rooted in the modernist paradigm. For decades, architectural thought and practice were dominated by modernism, a current which conquered space through forms that expressed technological advances, a belief in progress, and a disdain for the old. An international style of geometric shapes, embodying early calls for access to sun, light, and air for all, modernism expressed architecture’s triumph over space from Brasilia to Indian Chandigarh, from Western business districts to socialist housing estates. Place-making appeared as a reaction to such spaces that were seen as devoid of meaning. The goal became the shaping of a *genius loci*, the character of the place, connected to its past and ‘identity’. It marked a turn to the past of numerous societies towards the end of the twentieth century, manifested also in the increasing attention to memory and heritage (Assmann 2011; Macdonald 2013).

Yet the relationship to the past is for post-conflict space a predicament. The question is whether place-making, with its interest in the past, the character of the place, but also ‘identity’, which often unsettles conflict areas, is an opportunity or a challenge for such spaces. Is the fixation on the past a dangerous liability? Some would suggest that modernist answers, the international style that dominated the mid-twentieth century, with its rejection of the past, or any non-place bound solutions could be a better option for such places. Yet tabula rasa reconstructions have been often resented by residents themselves and did not help the processing of trauma (Hubbard, Faire, and Lilley 2003). Moreover, as geographer Doreen Massey has argued (2013), the sense of place should not be seen solely as a past-focused category, centred on the traditional identity of the place and its people. There can also be a ‘progressive sense of place’, which mirrors the diversity of urban residents in a globalizing world. The sense of place can be thus inclusive of a multiplicity of voices, yet still create local character.
While the ‘progressive sense of place’ reflects the complexities of cities experiencing diverse migration today, many cities affected by conflict witness historically grounded difference, often mobilized as reasoning or target of violence. In these situations, multiple identities and forms of belonging coexist in space, in an array of possibilities from ‘harmonious’ coexistence to antagonism and conflict. If architecture has been a key way to express belonging:

The most exacting, exciting and enticing attempts to produce (...) new modes of belonging have been taking place in contemporary architecture and performance art as they have tried to redefine – in practice – what is meant by place as living rather than lived space (Amin and Thrift 2002, 48),

the question is how do architecture and place-making deal with such difference.

In situations of existing diversity, drawing from multiple traditions to create a contemporary architecture celebrating togetherness, past and place alike, can be defined as a specific form of place-making, which I call syncretic place-making. Syncretism here echoes the contemporary anthropological understanding as defined by Charles Stewart (1999; 2014), who refers to mixture and diversity expressed through practices of proximity and convergence. This departs from traditional usages of syncretism as solely related to religious borrowings and integration (Stewart and Shaw 1994). By reshifting to a local, diverse identity, syncretic place-making can embody a mode of drawing on and continuing to build a common world, that binds and looks toward the future, rather than fixate on past trauma. Nevertheless, as opposed to modernism’s tabula rasa approach, this future is built on a synthesis of elements of the past, it is rooted and situated.

In architectural thought and practice, the aim to bridge different viewpoints and express the convergence of difference appears in the work of certain architects. Contemporary challenges lead to an increasing interest in the possibilities of architecture to sustain a common life. For instance, the theme of the 2021 Venice Architecture Biennial, arguably the most prestigious event in the architecture world, was centred around the question ‘How will we live together?’, a challenging question for many human experiences, particularly conflict cities. One of the most striking pieces at the 2021 edition, curated by Hashim Sarkis, was the Cyprus Pavilion. The Cypriot team, led by a duo of Cypriot architects, Urban Radicals (Era Savvides and Nasios Varnavas), designed a large table, with an irregular shape, encompassing the pavilion’s rooms and shaping a space for gathering. The table was described as a ‘commoning surface for re-thinking living together’. Their vision echoes Arendt’s table metaphor of the world in common, but also the tenets of syncretic place-making:

It’s this idea of coexisting of all these different, imperfect fragments coming together to create a whole but without even after losing their character to become one, just through a form that has absorbed everything. It is about valuing the process of assembling these pieces.5

The table referenced the topographic terrain of Cyprus, on which they embedded various objects, related to infrastructure, crafts, and play. The diversity of Cyprus’s past and present is evoked, with multiple references and a weaving together of elements and possibilities for this territory usually associated with conflict and division. Their design aimed to highlight a sense of collectivity and exchange. They conceptualized their approach as
an Anachoresis, introduced as a ‘foundational act that takes place on the convergence of various scales and rhythms, in spatial configurations where distances are blurred and inhabited’. As the table connects different objects, it serves as a bridge. The table can be accessed from multiple points, shaping ‘new rhythms of sociality’, and including moving parts, which ‘suggest a negotiation between cohabiting subjects, forming different proxemic patterns’.

Shifting to the scale of the city, syncretic place-making, the aim to shape a ‘good city’ involving multiple perspectives, is both through the process and through the outcome an embodiment of the Arendtian ‘world in common’. The city, as a setting for praxis, represents a multitude of possibilities (Carl 2000, 334). The process of reconstruction of the built environment could then have as a main goal the shaping of places, from institutions and public spaces, which can serve as arenas to sustain encounter and Arendt’s much appreciated agon, the channelling of tensions and conflict for democratic goals. By concentrating on the constructive aspect of this world in common, society and reconstruction alike have the potential to sustain peace. This is where the city emerges as a spatial universe that can support peace.

The shaping of a sense of place is important for residents of the city who experienced the destruction of their familiar environment. Moreover, it is also important for displaced people who remain in the city after the end of conflict. The challenge is how spatial practices can shape a sense of place and belonging that echoes the ‘world in common’ in a space that is contested by multiple groups. The spatial predicaments voiced by Arendt: how can loyalty and responsibility, as well as the political community, engage with sometimes dissonant plurality? how can a sense of place and belonging relate to multiple, sometimes subversive architectural discourses? The Arendtian world in common is not one of erasing difference, but one of engaging with the agon of different views. We shall turn now to discuss a specific urban situation which will highlight the potential and the challenges of such a place-making approach. I will highlight how the city of Sarajevo, despite the past violence and the continuing antagonisms, also offers spatial imaginaries and place-making practices that can provide an embodiment of the Arendtian promise and mobilize space for peace.

**Conflict and the cosmopolitan city: Sarajevo**

In the centre of Sarajevo, a monument erected just after the 1992–95 war proclaims ‘the multicultural human will build the world’. It embodies not only a cosmopolitan aspiration where residents engage with the world they have in common, but is built on the urban imaginary of pre-war Sarajevo— that is, the way the city was understood by residents and portrayed by its cultural elites—of the cosmopolitan city par excellence. Described as a ‘Jerusalem of Europe’— and that had to do with the historic juxtaposition of religions and not with the contemporary conflict— Sarajevo’s dominant pre-war image was that of a cosmopolitan city bridging religions and identities, traditionally thriving through its pluralism. On the other hand, many external accounts during the war, as well as certain nationalist narratives, present the city as a place of perennial conflict, with segregated lives and spaces for each rigidly defined group. The two imaginaries, however, relate to actual practices of the past: historians of BiH showed evidence to support both (Donia 2006; Greble 2011; Simmons 2001). As for Sarajevo’s spatial structure, it was traditionally
one of togetherness and apartness alike. Its central core was a place of meeting of all groups, while the mahalas, extending on hills alongside the long Miljacka river valley, typically for Ottoman cities, hosted homogenous religious communities around worship places, including Muslims (later defined as Bosniaks), Catholics (later identified as Bosnian Croats), and Orthodox (later, Bosnian Serbs). During the Habsburg times and in interwar Yugoslavia, arrivals from the countryside contributed to an increase in the Christian population. During socialism, the residential divisions were blurred and shifted, while local versus newcomer identities were emerging.

The war in BiH brought an almost four-year siege over Sarajevo, which affected its built environment – shelled buildings, destroyed institutions, and a myriad of pockmarked facades – and killed and wounded many civilians. Sarajevo, as the capital city of the newly independent state of BiH, was not only a prime target during the war (of the Yugoslav National Army at first, followed by the Bosnian Serb paramilitaries), but also an important space where urban reconfigurations mirrored post-war politics. Two main narratives dominated the understanding of war: one, popular both in the international media as well as mobilized by nationalist politics focused on the Serb origin of the attackers and framed it as an ethnic conflict; the second, issued by Sarajevan cultural elites, including, notably, architect Ivan Štraus (1995), focused on the attack on the city as a cosmopolitan place for being such a locale of mixing between people of various religions by rural paramilitaries who opposed this mixture. Another architect, the former mayor of Belgrade, Bogdan Bogdanović (1993), defined this attack on the mixed spaces of the city as urbicide, a term which became widely used with regard to such attacks on common life in contemporary warfare (Coward 2009).

While the brand of cosmopolitanism endured after the war, demographic realities became different, as the city lost its Serb population (about a quarter of the pre-war population), and received about 90 000 internally displaced people, mostly Bosniaks. Moreover, the Dayton peace agreement brought the demarcation line between the two entities of Republika Srpska (RS) and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina within the urban territory of Sarajevo. Two cities emerged: Sarajevo (in the Federation), with a Bosniak majority, and East Sarajevo (in RS), as a mostly Bosnian Serb town. The experience of the siege transformed the perception of common living among many Sarajevans. As the conflict unfolded, ethnic categories became more salient, as fear and suspicion replaced trust of those belonging to other groups (Maček 2009).

While war is over, tension and conflict are not. The Bosnian public sphere abounds with declarations reflecting the separatist desires of RS officials and incendiary remarks by politicians. It is not a case of everyday violence, there are fears of the emergence of new violence resulting from the more radical young generations brought up in the post-war Dayton framework (Azinovic, Bassuener, and Weber 2011). As opposed to looking at Sarajevo as a ‘post-conflict’ city, the everyday tensions between groups advocate for an understanding of the dynamics and practices of ongoing non-violent conflict in cities (Pullan and Baillie 2013). While violent conflict is over, conflict has transformed and morphed into more structural and symbolic forms of violence (Conflict in Cities 2012b). Sarajevo’s mayor Muhidin Hamamžić (2000–2005), interviewed by Bollens (2007, 102), stated that ‘The goal of the war was to separate the country. We haven’t finished the war. We stopped the killing, but the desire to move Bosnia toward the goal of separation is still present’. Hamamžić’s observation implies that BiH undergoes processes after the
war that continue the war goals by other means, this is a time of conflict without the violence of war. Consequently, Sarajevo witnesses various forms of ongoing conflict in politics and everyday life, that sustain contestation and antagonism, echoing therefore conditions in other ‘contested cities’ (Pullan and Baillie 2013; Bădescu 2017). Nevertheless, as in other ‘contested cities’, Sarajevo is also a place where everyday life practices bridge divisions (Bădescu 2015; Summa 2021).

The architectural reshaping of Sarajevo reflects these societal and political processes of division and antagonism (Ristic 2018; Bădescu 2014). In reconstructing religious and socialist-era landmarks, architects often reflected the politically dominant narratives, erasing inconvenient pasts and promoting ethnoreligious-centred visions. The new geography of recently built religious buildings and memorials does not just mirror the political tensions, but contributes to them (Bădescu 2019b). The remaking of the city with international office architecture and shopping malls similarly highlights the emergence of new allegiances with foreign actors, which echo post-colonial relationships between the local and foreign states (Bădescu 2016; Bădescu 2019c). The modernism of socialist Yugoslavia has been replaced in key spaces in the city centre by architectural makeovers, which architects like Sead Gološ transparently articulate as an intentional move away from the Yugoslav experiment (Badescu 2019c). Architectural reconfigurations thus serve different platforms of nation-building and consolidation of antagonistic memories of war, as well as of erasure of periods of common projects. That mirrors many of the practices existing in contested cities around the world, where local and international actors alike participate in spatial reconfigurations where either there is an intentionality to embody a particular politics, or engage with ‘a business as usual’ approach. The consequences on the urban space of these approaches are at best neutral and at worst detrimental to processes of peacebuilding (Bădescu 2017; Pullan and Baillie 2013; Gusic 2019). Nevertheless, despite being dominated by these kinds of approaches, Sarajevo also harbours alternative architectural agencies that reflect the potential of spatial intervention for reshaping peace, and embody Arendt’s call for a world in common: syncretic place-making.

**Syncretic place-making**

In 2010, the BiH Architects’ Association published Restart 1995-2010, Architecture in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a collection of the best works in the architecture of the country, selected and edited by invited Dutch architect Hans Ibelings. One of the ‘finest recent achievements’ in the country was Amir Vuk’s Turkish Cultural Centre. While open to the street gaze, it builds on the Ottoman tradition that the essence of the house is not the façade, but the interior (Ibelings 2010). The entrance from the heterogeneous streetscape of unkempt Habsburg era buildings is through a sokak, a narrow side street, that leads to the central avlija, a spacious courtyard, both typical features of Sarajevo built environment. The doksat – jutty – the most striking Ottoman feature of the house, staging inside a social space, defines the street front, connecting both to the building’s function, as it does it to the streetscape and to the Sarajevo vernacular. Vuk’s approach has been hailed by several of my architect interlocutors in Sarajevo as providing high-quality architecture that is critical and responsive to the context.8

While Vuk’s architecture is admired by academics, architects and residents alike, it is also marginal in the sense of its presence in the city. Because of the specificities of the market,
weak and undeveloped, and arguably due to the ruling urban regime preferring certain other architects, his work is not on large or central urban projects, as opposed to his work in the Bosnian provinces. Nevertheless, an analysis of approaches such as Vuk’s provides insights into how a place-responsive reconstruction relates to a context of urban peacebuilding.

Engaging with the context and layers of the past is for Vuk a guiding principle:

That is our duty, of people who work in some complexity [...] It is really heterotopic. The heterotopic layers are incorporated in me. I am born in this city. For me it’s normal to cross the katedrala and I am in the East, in the čaršija. That quickly changes atmosphere. Only in Las Vegas you can have this. But in Sarajevo, it is historical, and it gives us the opportunity to feel comfortable in that part, and also in that part. That is why we combine. I like to say that my architecture is like the dish, the Bosnian pot [...] It needs a lot of time. You have to put everything to work together. And wait. Maybe in architecture that is also a recipe.11

For Vuk, architecture acknowledges socio-cultural diversity, of which it makes creative sense. Different traditions and antagonisms are thus treated as sources of creativity. Bosnia itself is seen as such a Bosnian pot, a space that brings together East and West, coexisting in Sarajevo’s urban image side by side, the čaršija (Ottoman commercial center) next to the Habsburg quarter, mosques next to churches. But the metaphor of the Bosnian pot (bosanski lonac) does not suggest mere coexistence, but merging into a syncretic assemblage. Tone Bringa showed the syncretic nature of religion in Bosnia, with the pre-war practices of celebrating each other’s religious holidays, intermarriage (Bringa 1995), with modern BiH in between a melting pot of Bosnian and Yugoslav identities and a Bosnian pot of discrete, but assembled identities. Yet in calling it ‘heterotopic’, a term discussed by Michael Foucault (2004) in relation to places of otherness functioning in non-hegemonic settings, Vuk suggests that his approach is at once marginal and subversive, generating spaces of alterity in a Sarajevo dominated by a nationalist and investor-led city-making in the post-Dayton context.

Overall, BiH witnessed a revival of the ‘past’ in architecture. Restoration efforts became an integral part of reconstruction, and restoration today is a popular and lucrative subject for architecture students and practitioners.12 Moreover, a quasi-regionalist architecture took over villages and towns alike, inspired by the Bosnian vernacular. Yet there is a difference between the sense of place invoked by Vuk and the mere mimicry that abounds in new constructions throughout Bosnia. On his own account, Vuk combines the understanding of Bosnian tradition as a Bosnian pot with interpretations of the critical regionalism of Kenneth Frampton and the phenomenology of Bachelard and Pallasmaa, shaping an architecture for the senses, and an architecture for the sense of place. Invoking Bachelard’s (2014) ‘Poetics of Space’, Vuk describes himself as an architect of atmosphere. His method is to work together with the client on site, and to establish a design vision based on all senses, to be in touch with the building site and the people.13 Vuk is interested in stimulating all senses in his architecture. He quotes Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa’s (2005) ‘The Eyes of the Skin – Architecture and the Senses’ as inspiration for his aim to create spaces that we touch with the eyes and see with the hand. As geographer Yi Fu Tuan (1974) highlighted, a medieval cathedral has more impact on people than a modern skyscraper, as, despite its awe-inducing dimensions, a cathedral stimulates more senses, through music, smell, and touch. Through stimulating the senses, such buildings engender a sense of place in people.
After the catastrophe of war, many Sarajevans wanted to recover the pre-war city the way it was, in its social universe as in its outlook (Bădescu 2014). For financial, administrative, and architectural-professional reasons, a totally restorative reconstruction was hardly realistic. The restoration of a continuity of sense of place, however, was another way to provide the experience of ‘normality’, of familiarity though subtle continuity. What Amir Vuk does is to account for the qualities of the place and enhance them using a sensitivity to the local, aiming to highlight multi-sensorial experiences, while making it a particular Sarajevo place, with his references to syncretic traditions and heterogeneous spaces.

I call this a syncretic place-making reconstruction: bringing together multiple traditions in a diverse place to shape a contemporary architecture which celebrates this diversity. It is syncretic in its broader anthropological understanding as practices of proximity and convergence in a mixed community (Stewart 1999; Stewart 2014). It is place-making, as it is an architectural intervention that has as an embedded goal the transformation of space into a place with particular qualities, recognizable and potent to sustain a sense of place for its users.

The shaping of a sense of place and a place-responsive reconstruction is challenged by the predicament of inclusiveness of a plurality of voices beyond the ‘traditional’ diversity mix. A syncretic place-making reconstruction drawing from Sarajevo’s century-old diversity and mixture is indeed a celebration of Sarajevo’s cosmopolitanism. However, it could also be read as a glorification of a cultured Sarajevo that has been under the attack of the countryside. An attention to pre-war diversity could paradoxically be the source of animosities towards other forms of diversity, related to class, place of origin, and cultural categories. The second narrative of violence – that of the countryside against cities – is continued today through discourses (and often) practices of exclusion of those who found refuge in the city during and after the war and who remained in the city. The around 100,000 displaced people, while included and represented politically, have been to some extent constructed as a homogenous group and socially marginalized in the post-war narratives but also in everyday practices as uncultured newcomers by pre-war Sarajevans, elites and non-elites alike (Bădescu 2015). As such, cosmopolitanism becomes an exclusionary imaginary that separates allegedly open locals from threatening newcomers, a paradoxical situation when openness is valued, but not towards newcomers perceived as less open (Bădescu 2020).

The question that arises then is whether an approach that focuses on place and continuities does not a priori exclude the voices and experiences of newcomers. By favouring the vision of those who claim to understand the city’s space and character through in-depth lived experience and study, the immediate question is whether the city’s continuity through syncretic place-making could be limiting the potentialities and diversity of the post-war city as a different social universe. The challenge then for place-responsive reconstruction is how- and whether- to include the voices of newcomers to a place. This inclusion and co-production of space is opposed to the expectation that newcomers assimilate to the vision of the city based on past physicality and social realities. The discussion on reconstruction and its relationship to the past through a syncretic place-responsive approach is thus reminiscent of the debates on reconfiguring urban environments in situations of increasing socio-cultural diversity in our globalizing world. As such, it echoes Massey’s discussion of a ‘progressive sense of place’, derived from the changed
urban landscapes of London and its high immigrant populations. For Massey, such a ‘sense of place’ can be liberated from its possible reading as a stagnant, nostalgic concept. Consequently, an emerging question is whether a place-based reconstruction in such urban situations which witness a change in their population should be place-responsive, in the sense of relating to the place of the past, or in fact a place-making approach that responds also to the new voices and diversity more broadly.

Relating to the character of the place and city, to the *genius loci*, and aiming to create a sense of place does not preclude the impact of the political economy on design. Other architects in Sarajevo who echo the syncretic place-making approach also illustrate the limits of architectural-agency-facing investors and, political actors, both local and international. For instance, Sanja Galić and Igor Grozdanić (Studio nonstop) do not regard architecture as abstract and universal, but as concrete, specific, and heteronomous (Ibelings, Galić, and Grozdanić 2012). Their place-making approach has, according to Ibelings (2010), a healing and cohesive impact. Their insertions are sensitive to the context, attuned to the genius loci, but contemporary. Yet some of the prominent work of the two is subjugated to the mechanisms of the political economy that Grozdanić himself criticized as limiting the role of architecture. One such example is the Alta Shopping Centre, located across the main avenue from the Bosnian parliament. Its design philosophy relates to the concept of the Bosnian knot: a folded continuous strip of interior shopping streets, the building itself lies in the central, interconnected Marijin Dvor area. It was designed with white, dignified, ‘museum’ facades, seemingly as a response to the Museum of Revolution across the road (today, the Museum of History of BiH). Grozdanić decried how the building has been covered with posters which hide the contextual references of the design, bringing consumption to the forefront of urban life. Through the sheer function of the building and its makeover, the intentions of the design are subsumed by the dominant political economy and by echoes of an international, placeless aesthetic. Thus, a building aimed to respond to the spirit of the place echoes to an extent Marc Augé’s non-places.

There is then the question of agency in such a type of reconstruction. While architects can display an intentionality to express the heterogeneity of voices and experiences, the involvement of community members remains key for dealing with the past dimension of reconstruction. As I show elsewhere (Bădescu 2015), having residents as passive recipients of reconstruction does not address the effects of war on communities, political emotions such as hope, and the issue of trust. Not engaging city dwellers of various backgrounds through participation can be a missed opportunity to strengthen post-war recovery and enhance the potential for diversity in place-making.

While Vuk and Studio Non Stop’s approaches have been limited by political economy and the visibility of their projects, what emerges is the potential of such place-responsive and syncretic place-making reconstruction approaches to conflict cities. First, by advancing local character and the syncretism of cultures in place-making in Sarajevo, this approach provides an alternative to the nation-building processes embodied by simplified ‘national styles’, which advance a certain symbolic violence and block coming-to-terms-with-the-past. Second, it builds on a distinctive urban identity and on an urban imaginary of pluralism, contributing to the cosmopolitan image of Sarajevo and strengthening, with all its limitations, the possibility of a local world in common.
Conclusion

Architecture and place-making can be important aspects of peacebuilding and reimagining a world in common after conflict. Voices within the architectural community inquire how will humans live together in the future, with architects such as the curators of the Cyprus Pavilion at the Venice Biennial aiming to illustrate architecturally such a world in common. In relationship to peacebuilding, the alternative approach that emerged in this article, inspired by the practice of certain Sarajevo architects, is a form of place-making that challenges both identity politics and the political emotions associated with conflict, focusing on the characteristics of place and embracing the city’s diversity. In the case of cities like Sarajevo, conflict and reconstruction alike are usually framed in an antagonism between cosmopolitanism and particularist identities. However, a syncretic place-making reconstruction based on enhancing the local urban character responds to a nostalgia for an imagined pre-war universe and can foster a sense of place for pre-war residents and newcomers alike. It weaves together environmental and historical context and the particularities of the place, promoting the city as a space of interaction and agon, of intersections of diversities, while avoiding particularistic isolationist representations of identities. A reconstruction that reacts to a cosmopolitan self-image and a narrative of urbicide is about restoring the sense of place of the cosmopolitan, syncretic city.

A reconstruction concentrating on place rather than time of war and conflict avoids a cycle of structural and symbolic violence which prolongs the same narratives, practices, and processes that produced violence in the first place. That does not imply that conflict is avoided. Conflict is an inherent part of cities. The challenge of a place-responsive approach is how to include the heterogeneous voices of the other. By creating a world in common that is place-focused, urban reconstruction can exclude individuals and groups such as the displaced people who arrived during the war and remained in the city, marginalized by a narrative that creates a crisp cleavage between the urban cultured Sarajevans and the uncultured newcomers. Claiming urban exceptionalism could not be a simple way out to ignore the interrelated processes that connect cities with their hinterlands and rural areas beyond. The urban as a world in common should be cautious of creating other forms of exclusion and discrimination. Instead, a place-making reconstruction has the potential to transform the multiple conflicts and faultlines by concentrating on the city as commonality, as a creative process. It can channel energies to an Arendtian building of a world of meaning for the future polity, rather than into a perpetual investigation of blame and guilt ascribed to various groups that creates further blame, guilt, and frustration.

The Sarajevo practices of syncretic place-making emerge from the agency of architects. While the intentionality of architects is connected to togetherness, and implicitly peace-building, their agency is limited. One of the architects discussed feels marginal in the city; his designs are heterotopic, shadowed by urban regimes favouring architects in connection having the politics that are embedded in tensions and animosities. The other, although has a central presence in the city, is hindered by developers’ interests. Moreover, intentionality does not equal reception: while residents can commend the character of the resulting places, they do not necessarily read them through the spectre of commonality: for that, it is the narrative element and public presence and association of architecture that are key. Moreover, while the projects embody the world in common, their
process is still one dominated by the architect – direct participation is absent. Sarajevo’s architects inspire our conceptualization of syncretic place-making as a spatialization of the Arendtian world in common. Yet, they just open the horizon of possibilities, as the lack of autonomy and participation hinder the full realization of the model. Nonetheless, the inspiration they bring can ignite processes that can further highlight the role of place-making in peacebuilding.

By reshifting to a local, yet pluralistic, identity, place-making can embody a mode of building a world in common, that binds and looks toward the future, rather than fixate on past trauma. The understanding of a local context can provide models of engagement that are more sustainable and promising than those of interventions of city-making from afar that are decontextualized and which can provide more harm. Taking into consideration both the promises and challenges of syncretic place-making, international intervention and statebuilding practice can creatively engage with space for peace.

Notes

1. Spatial interventions are acts in which actors modify space in order to reach certain goals (e.g., the construction of affordable housing in an area to address housing needs; an urban programme to increase liveability in a city by providing more green space; the construction of a wall to separate two populations etc.). In the particular discussion of peace and conflict studies, a spatial intervention can be an act of involvement in a conflict situation that focuses on a spatial aspect.
2. The Venice Architecture Biennale is a landmark event in the architecture world, consisting of a main exhibit and national pavilions exhibiting on a particular, pre-selected theme. I examined the content of both the main and national exhibits at the 2021 Biennale and interviewed a series of curators and architects of projects that were most relevant to the theme.
3. The author is grateful in particular to Mejrema Zatrić and Selma Porobić for their collaboration in organizing this workshop.
4. For a critique of celebratory discussions of participation and bottom-up practices, see (Hilhorst, Christoplos, and Van Der Haar 2010).
9. Several of my interviewees have mentioned, under the condition of anonymity, that certain architects are preferred by the local and especially national government, because of various personal and business connections
10. Outside of Sarajevo, Vuk’s practice designed local landmarks such as the Ostojići Mosque or the VF Shopping Centre in Lukavac.
12. Aida Zgonić, Faculty of Architecture Sarajevo, personal communication.
13. ‘For me it is important to make good atmosphere on the building site with the people who produce for me that good atmosphere.’ Vuk, interview.
15. Grozdanić, presentation at workshop Post-war Sarajevo, organized by the author; Grozdanić, interview.
16. Augé’s influential concept of ‘non-places’ refers to characterless spaces produced in contemporary times that look the same everywhere, such as airport lounges, highways, or chain hotel rooms.
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Notes on contributor

Gruia Bădescu is a Research Fellow at the Zukunftskolleg, University of Konstanz. He holds a PhD from the University of Cambridge and, before Konstanz, he was a Departmental Lecturer and a Research Associate at the University of Oxford. As an Alexander von Humboldt fellow, hosted by Jan and Aleida Assmann at the University of Konstanz, he researched syncretic place-making in cities. His publications have examined post-war reconstruction in cities in Southeastern Europe and the Middle East, as well as spatial engagements with political violence in Latin America. He is currently completing a book on post-war reconstruction and dealing with the past.

ORCID

Gruia Bădescu http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0180-8960

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