

## Bridging Scars: Memory, Architecture and Reconciliation in Post-Conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina

### Introduction: A Country Built on Memory

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina left deep scars in its society, visible through its urban fabric. As Yugoslavia disintegrated, long-standing multi-ethnic communities fractured along nationalist lines. What followed was one of Europe's most devastating conflicts since World War II, with over 100,000 people killed, two million displaced and entire towns and cities destroyed. The war tore through everyday life, not only with violence, but by dismantling the delicate social fabric that once held diverse communities together.

Nearly three decades later, Bosnia and Herzegovina remains a post-conflict society, grappling with how to confront and remember its traumatic past. Nowhere is this more palpable than in the urban environments of Sarajevo and Mostar. These two cities experienced some of the war's most visible destruction and now serve as open-air archives of its legacy. Buildings are still pockmarked by bullet holes and explosives, some even partially destroyed and left to decay. Monuments have also been erected in silence or controversy. The architecture in Bosnia and Herzegovina tells a complex story of survival, loss and contested memory.



*Building in Mostar pockmarked with bullet holes, left unrepaired.*

This blog explores how architecture serves as a tool of remembrance in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina. It draws on the framework of French historian Pierre Nora, who introduced the idea of *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory. According to Nora, when societies can no longer rely on lived communal memory because of rupture, trauma or generational distance, they begin to embed memory in material forms such as buildings, ruins, memorials and symbolic spaces. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, narratives of the past remain politically sensitive and divided, hence the built-environment becomes the primary medium in which memory is preserved, negotiated or even suppressed and erased.

In Sarajevo, the capital city and site of the longest siege in modern history, everyday structures silently bear witness to suffering. Apartment blocks marked by bullet holes, cemeteries occupying former parks and subtle memorials tucked between shops and cafes. At the same time, memories have also been erased, such as Sniper Alley which saw 225 people killed, now lined with modern developments and shopping centres, highlighting the tension between remembrance and erasure. In Mostar, the destruction and later reconstruction of the iconic Stari Most (Old Bridge) has come to symbolise both the deep divisions caused by war and the attempts of reconciliation. Yet across both cities, questions remain: Who gets to remember? What is chosen for preservation and what is allowed, forced, and to be forgotten?

This blog is structured around three central ideas:

1. **Architecture as a Witness**, examining how war-damaged buildings, ruins and urban divisions serve as silent testimonies to violence.
2. **Erasure of Memory**, exploring how urban redevelopment and political agendas can obscure or overwrite difficult histories.
3. **Architecture for reconciliation**, highlighting efforts where architecture and urbanity are utilised to heal division and rebuild community.

By looking at how memory lives on in the physical spaces of Sarajevo and Mostar, this blogpost considers architecture not just as a building or shelter, but as political and social actors that continue to shape how the past is remembered and how the future is envisioned for reconciliation and development.

### **Architecture as Witness: The City as a Living Museum**

In post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, official narratives of the past remain divided and reconciliation remains difficult. Buildings that are damaged and left to decay often serve as the most honest witness to its violent history. These structures do not speak through curated exhibitions or plaques at memorials, but through its physical material scars. Bullet holes, shattered windows, shell marks and even partially destroyed structures that are left untouched serve as living testimonies, silent yet powerful reminders of the war's physical and emotional toll etched into the everyday fabric of the city.



*Severely damaged abandoned building in Mostar, near Bulevar, slowly being taken over by Nature.*

French historian Pierre Nora, argues that when the organic transmission of collective memory fades due to trauma, generational loss or cultural rapture, societies begin to externalise memory in physical forms. These become *lieux de memoire* or “sites of memory” which are spaces that bear the weight of history when lived memory is no longer sufficient. In Mostar and Sarajevo, such sites are not only the designated memorials and monuments, but also everyday remnants of violence. These could manifest themselves as a building wall with bullet holes on a quiet residential street, a shattered glass window or even a war-torn structure looming beside a cafe.



*Severely damaged building along Marsala Tita, weakened structure supported by scaffolding.*

In Mostar, architectural witnessing takes a different yet equally complex form. While the Stari Most (Old Bridge) has been faithfully reconstructed after its destruction in 1993, many residential and religious buildings on both sides of the Neretva River still show the scars of war. This dichotomy can be felt through the urban fabric, with entire blocks remaining in disrepair, awkwardly restored, or conspicuously neglected. War-damaged buildings often sit beside freshly reconstructed religious or civic structures, reflecting how specific investment and memory politics can depict the priorities of their respective communities, as if caught in a tension between preservation and forgetting.

One of the most striking examples of this silent architectural testimony is the Razvitak department store. Once a symbol of modern urban life in Yugoslavia, now sits abandoned in the heart of the city, with its facade laden with bullet holes and its structure visibly decaying. It used to feature a shopping centre with a multi-storey apartment above it, but due to heavy bombing and shelling, the apartment had to be demolished, while the shopping centre was left to decay. Furthermore, the shopping centre is located near the invisible dividing line between the Croat majority west and Bosniak majority east. The building's neglect is not merely due to economics or disrepair, it is a spatial embodiment of contested memory. Rebuilding Razvitak would require cooperation, agreement and a shared vision of the future between the Croats and Bosniak politicians, where even schools and public monuments are highly contested, often duplicated by ethnicity. As such, the building remains frozen in time, a hollow witness to what Mostar once

was and what it still struggles to become. Its silence is louder than any memorial plaque, a visible void where shared urban life used to exist, now avoided and ignored.



*Razvitak Department Store with its apartment building above during the Yugoslav period.*



*Razvitak Department Store today, badly damaged and vandalised with graffiti.*

In Sarajevo, architectural witnessing often reveals itself not through dramatic ruins, but through subtly repaired scars. Sarajevo was under a prolonged siege between 1992 and 1996, the longest in modern European history, with constant shelling and sniper fire, but less full-scale urban combat within the city centre, as compared to Mostar. As such, buildings across the city, especially in neighbourhoods such as Grbavica, and along former frontlines of the siege, show signs of quick post-war repairs. Walls that were once perforated by bullets have been patched up, windows replaced, and facades re-rendered. Yet in many cases, the outlines of the original damage remain faintly visible beneath fresh plaster or paint. A close look at these facades reveal inconsistencies in texture, mismatched materials or paint, and outlines of new patchwork over old bullet holes. These traces betray what the repaired surfaces try to forget, serving as quiet reminders of the violence once inflicted on the city, testifying not only to the past, but to the attempt to move beyond it. They embody a tension between erasure and endurance, between the urge to rebuild and the impossibility of complete repair. In this way, even buildings that have been “healed” still function as witnesses, holding the residue of trauma on its walls. As such, along the streets of Sarajevo, the desire to move on meets the architecture’s quiet refusal to forget, where memory persists not through declared memorials, but through material traces that endure beneath paint, plaster and time.



*Building opposite Hotel Central in Sarajevo, damage from the war is still visible through the outline of the patchwork from bullet holes.*

Yet, not all buildings communicate memory through decay or abandonment. In some cases, architectural witnessing is intentional and curated, where a conscious decision is made to preserve fragments of violence amid otherwise restored structures. In Mostar, we were strolling along Bulevar, its buildings looked freshly painted and the streets breathed a feeling of liveliness. However, as we neared the end of the street, we walked past a residential building that was built during the socialist period. Its facade was refurbished after the war, but one of its walls was densely pockmarked with bullet holes, giving hints of Bulevar's violent involvement during the war. It served as the former frontline between Bosniak and Croat forces, with its streets seeing one of the most violent conflicts. The decision to retain this wall amid an otherwise repaired structure seems deliberate, allowing the building to function not just as housing, but also as a living monument to the street's ugly past. During the conflict, Bulevar was the epicentre of firefights and sniper positions; the bullet holes reflecting not just abstract damage, but direct physical evidence of the confrontation. Whether this scarred wall was preserved by intention or circumstance, its presence interrupts the narrative of recovery, and instead becomes a layered site of memory. In the language of Pierre Nora, it functions as a *lieu de memoire*, not because it is labelled or curated, but because it remains as a living artifact of the war, embedded into the very structure that the people of today live in. The building thus stands as both shelter and witness, blending the everyday with what is to be remembered, reminding those who pass it that peace in Mostar has come through fragile negotiations.



*Bulevar in Mostar in 1993, after the long confrontation between Croat and Bosniak forces.*



*Damaged wall retained amidst newly repaired buildings as a means of remembrance at Bulevar.*

Together, these architectural remnants, whether shattered, patched, or deliberately preserved form a fragmented but powerful archive of Bosnia and Herzegovina's recent past. In the absence of a unified national narrative, it is often the buildings themselves that speak most honestly about what happened. They are not official monuments, but accidental memorials that have been woven into the urban landscape. In Sarajevo, memory lives through uneven plaster and faded facades. In Mostar, it resonates through bullet-scarred walls left intact amidst renewal. These sites do not demand attention, but they invite subtle reflection, bearing witness not only to the violence endured, but to the unresolved nature of healing. As Pierre Nora mentions, memory lives on not just in what we choose to remember, but in what is allowed to remain. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, memory is quite literally set in stone.

## **Erasure of Memory**

While war-damaged buildings stand as silent witnesses to Bosnia and Herzegovina's traumatic past, an equally powerful force operates alongside them: the deliberate erasure of memory through reconstruction, renovation, and selective forgetting. This process highlights the complex politics of post-war urban development, where decisions about what to restore, what to remove, and what to leave untouched become acts of memory-making. The tension between preservation and erasure reflects deeper questions about how societies choose to remember, and who holds the power to shape that memory. More often than not, it tells us more about present-day political dynamics than historical truth.

Understanding the politics of rebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina requires acknowledging the framework put in place by the Dayton Peace Agreement. The establishment of the Commission to Preserve National Monuments under Annex 8 was intended to safeguard cultural heritage, but in practice it introduced a new layer of political negotiation. The commission was initially made up of ethnically representative members, meaning that heritage designation became subject to political compromise. In its early stages, the commission even kept its decisions hidden to avoid nationalist groups targeting sites of the other communities, a reminder that preservation itself was seen as political, and not simply for remembrance.

This framework has had significant consequences for how memory is preserved or forgotten. The commission's designation of 777 sites as national monuments reflects not only their historical importance, but also the outcomes of political bargaining. Properties that do not enjoy cross-ethnic support risk being neglected or even demolished. In this way, bureaucracy becomes a tool of memory politics, shaping what survives and what is allowed to disappear.

Perhaps the most well-known example of restoration in post-war Bosnia is the reconstruction of Stari Most, which is often cited as a symbol of reconciliation. The bridge's rebuilding was carefully managed by UNESCO and involved a wide range of international actors to ensure neutrality. In fact, early funding offers from the Turkish government were turned down, for fear that it would appear too aligned with the Bosniak side. Instead, international cooperation led to the bridge's meticulous reconstruction using original Ottoman materials and techniques. The aim was not just to rebuild the structure, but to restore a symbol of shared cultural heritage that could become a point of unity.



*Stari Most nearing completion of reconstruction in 2002.*

Yet, as architectural professor Maja Popovac and others have observed, this celebrated project also masks more complex questions about who decides what is worth remembering. The bridge may represent a hope for reconciliation, but it cannot resolve the divisions that still linger within society. While its reconstruction was carefully managed to avoid ethnic bias and to symbolise shared heritage, the focus on Stari Most as a unifying monument can risk simplifying a far more complex reality. The restored bridge stands as a powerful symbol, but one that may inadvertently obscure ongoing political and social tensions within the city. It presents an image of peace and unity that is not always matched by the lived experiences of Mostar's residents, highlighting how well-intentioned memory projects can gloss over the unresolved fractures within the social fabric.

In contrast, many other sites that are equally significant but lack political consensus remain neglected. The earlier mentioned Razvitak department store in Mostar still sits abandoned near the invisible dividing line between Croat-majority west and Bosniak-majority east. Its facade is still riddled with bullet holes, and its condition reflects a much larger issue: memory that has become frozen in time. In 2024, the Social Net Group announced a major redevelopment plan for the site. The plan aims to transform the long-abandoned building into a sleek residential and commercial complex, complete with modern shopping facilities and expanded parking. Framed as a much needed act of urban revitalisation, the project is welcomed as a practical solution to

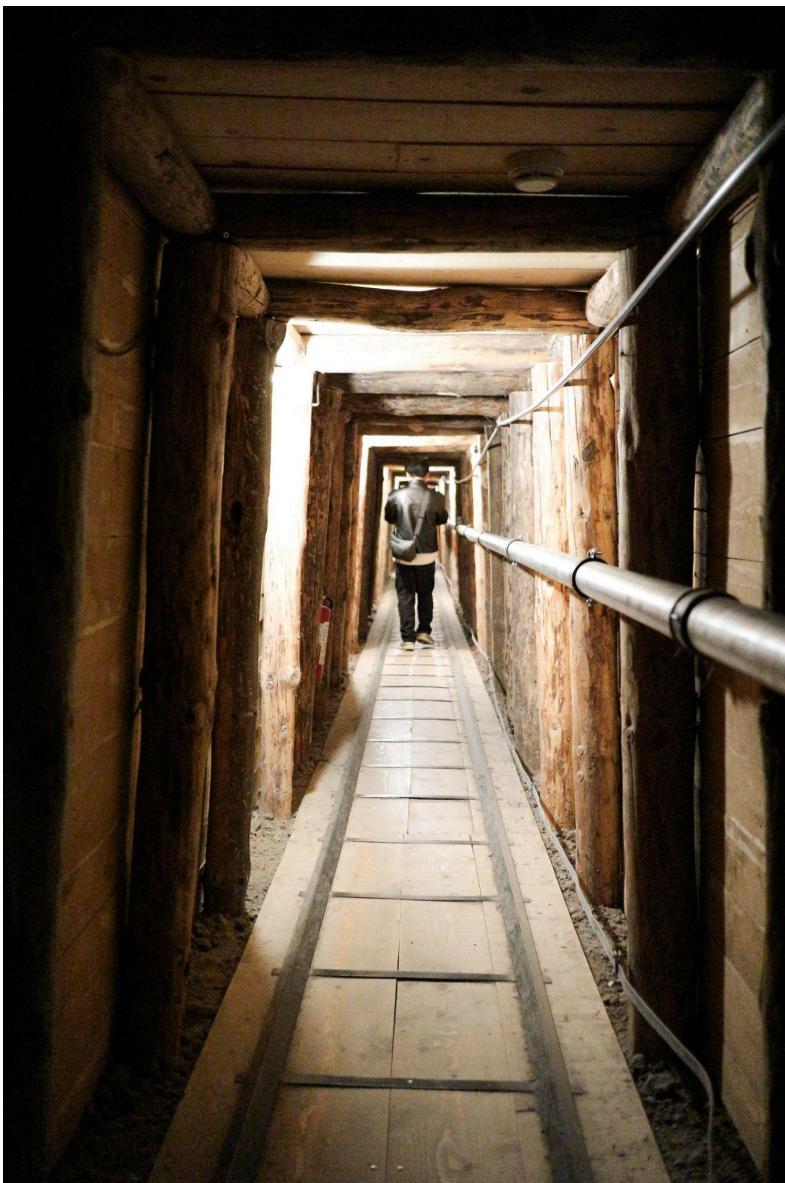
infrastructural and economic challenges in the city. However, what remains notably absent from the proposal is any reference to the site's wartime history.

The redevelopment and revitalisation promises functionality, but in doing so, contributes to a subtler form of memory erasure. By replacing the bullet-riddled facade and war-damaged structure with polished surfaces and adopting a more modern style of architecture, the material evidence of the city's past is quietly removed. The scars that once bore witness to conflict will be overwritten by neutral modernity, and with them the opportunity for remembrance potentially being lost. While the project solves immediate urban needs, it also illustrates how post-war cities often rebuild without remembering, transforming once-significant sites into clean slates that prioritise modernity over context. In this way, memory is not contested openly, but erased through omission, making history less visible in the urban landscape.



*Visual render of the new Razvitak redevelopment plans, as if ignoring its current context and memory.*

This form of erasure is not only confined to Mostar. In Sarajevo, similar tensions emerge around the rise of war tourism. Museums and guided tours that focus on the years during the siege are increasingly marketed to international visitors, offering curated experiences of trauma and resilience. While these attractions can raise awareness and provide educational value, they also risk reducing lived suffering to spectacle. For instance, some tours focus on sniper alley, frontline ruins and former bunkers, packaged into experiences that can feel more like entertainment than reflection. The Tunnel Museum, while grounded in authentic history and preserving a vital ingress and egress to Sarajevo during the siege, also participates in this commodification, with its emotional impact shaped by curated displays of visitor expectations. In these contexts, memory becomes performative, raising difficult questions about how much of the war experience is being shared and how much is being staged.



*Reconstructed tunnel in the Tunnel Museum, height of the tunnel increased from 1.6m to 1.8m.*

Tourism, while economically beneficial, encourages selective memory. Sites that align with international curiosity are promoted, while more mundane or complex histories are sidelined. This, in turn, feeds into urban gentrification, as once-devastated neighbourhoods are refurbished for tourist consumption. In Sarajevo, this pressure displaces long-time residents whose lives are intertwined with the very memories being commodified.

Even large-scale housing reconstruction, while vital for recovery, has a complicated relationship with memory. The rehabilitation of over 260,000 homes since 1996 is a remarkable achievement. Yet in many cases, these homes have been rebuilt with modern facades that erase signs of wartime damage. While this can help residents move forward, it also removes subtle architectural witnesses such as patches, bullet scars, and cracks that once silently testified to what had been endured.

The politics of selective rebuilding are especially visible in areas marked by lingering ethnic tension, where the urban fabric becomes a memory map of competing identities. In Mostar, investment remains patchy, while others are left neglected. This is especially true with religious and civic architecture that often reflects the identity of the area's dominant ethnic group. A prime illustration is the Koski Mehmed Pasha Mosque, an Ottoman-era mosque that was severely damaged during the war. Its reconstruction, completed in 2001, was made possible thanks to funding from Turkey's Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) and additional support from Jordan. The mosque's restoration signalled cultural resilience for the Bosniak community, yet also underlined how heritage itself becomes intertwined with diplomacy, as architectural memory is shaped by external alliances. Such selective restoration projects may create the appearance of shared remembrance, but also leaves some less visible contested histories largely ignored.



*Koski Mehmed Pasha Mosque in Old Town, Sarajevo.*

At the same time, erasure is not always sinister. For many people, removal of war damage represents progress. Living under constant visual reminders of trauma is not easy, and for some, painting over bullet holes or rebuilding a flat is part of the process of reclaiming normalcy. In Mostar, creative interventions like filling shell damage with decorative ceramic tiles show how communities can find ways to acknowledge the past without being trapped by it.

The real challenge, then, is not to choose between remembering or forgetting, but to navigate the space in between. As Pierre Nora writes, sites of memory arise when lived memory begins to fade, but how these sites are made, maintained, or erased is never neutral. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, nearly thirty years after the war's end, memory remains active and contested. Nowhere is this more visible than in the architecture itself, where every wall, ruin, and restoration becomes part of the ongoing negotiation between the past and the future.

## **Architecture for Reconciliation**

Despite its silent testimony to the violence and fractured relationships left by the Bosnian War, architecture in post-conflict contexts can also become a powerful medium for healing and reconciliation. In Mostar, one of the most powerful examples is the reconstruction of Stari Most, a project widely heralded as a triumphant symbol of post-war unity.

Destroyed by Croat forces in 1993, the collapse of Stari Most not only severed the two sides of the Neretva River that runs through the city but also the shared identity and ties between the Bosniak and Croat communities. When the bridge was finally rebuilt in 2004 with support from UNESCO and the international community, it was presented as more than restoring a historic structure. Instead, it was framed as an act of collective healing, a reconstruction not just of stone but of trust and memory.



*Stari Most in November 1993, destroyed by Croat forces during the Bosnian War.*

However, architecture professor Maja Popovac argues that the meaning of the new Stari Most is more complex than its celebratory narrative suggests. The project was neither a political gesture by the international community nor a symbol aligned with a single ethnic group. Instead, it arose through local recognition of the bridge's historical and emotional significance, later supported by international funding and expertise. Popovac highlights the careful negotiation needed to avoid ethnic bias in rebuilding Stari Most. An initial funding offer from Turkey raised concerns about favoring the Muslim community, prompting a broader, collaborative effort involving Bosniak and Croat groups, UNESCO, and international experts. Using original Ottoman materials and techniques, the reconstruction aimed to honour the bridge's shared cultural legacy rather than privilege any one group's narrative.



*Stari Most during its reconstruction period in 2001, led by a cross-ethnic collaborative effort.*

Yet, Popovac also acknowledges the limits of architectural symbolism. While the rebuilt bridge embodies the aspiration of reconciliation, it cannot by itself mend the city's deeper wounds. Mostar remains divided by enduring social and psychological fractures. With this in mind, Stari Most is not the culmination of reconciliation, but a foundational gesture, standing as a first step in the long process of reconciliation. It holds symbolic weight not because it resolves conflict, but because it signifies the shared commitment to rebuild. It stands as a material testament to what was broken and what is slowly being rebuilt, becoming part of the urban landscape that bears witness to war without words.

As Pierre Nora would suggest, memory is not always found in what is declared but in what is endured. In this way, Stari Most remains a living witness, not to a fully healed city, but to a people that is still in the process of remembering, rebuilding and reconciling through the architecture that surrounds them.



*Stari Most today has become a living testimony that reconciliation is possible.*

Aside from the reconstruction of Stari Most, the architecture of Mostar has become a vibrant open-air gallery, covered in street art and graffiti. This striking transformation is largely thanks to the Mostar Street Arts Festival, founded in 2012 by Marina Djapic and her six teammates. Each year, the festival brings together local and international artists to breathe new life into the city's ruins with murals, graffiti, and street installations.

Born from a desire to inject hope and creativity into a city still physically and symbolically divided by war, the festival aims to turn scars into art. It offers residents, especially young people, new ways to engage with their surroundings and reclaim public space with their artworks.



*Street arts from the festival bring colours to the post-war buildings of Mostar.*

One of the most powerful symbols of this transformation is the Sniper Tower. Once a bank, the building was used by snipers during the war to target civilians. Today, it is one of the city's largest canvases for street art. Thanks to the festival, its walls now carry vibrant murals and messages that call for peace, unity, and reconciliation.

The organisers describe the festival as more than just an art event. It is a cross-ethnic social movement, challenging political divisions and offering a vision of a shared future. Through art, it asserts that despite everything that happened, the people of Mostar are ready to move forward from the past.

At its core, the Mostar Street Arts Festival is “a manifestation of resistance to the imposed political reality” according to local poet and journalist Marko Tomas. It is a powerful platform for healing, not through official memorials or political treaties, but through the everyday reclamation of urban space. It provides an alternative model for reconciliation, rooted in creativity, community, and hope.



*The entrance to Sniper Tower, covered in graffiti calling for peace and unity.*

Henri Lefebvre argued that urban space is not just physically built but something that is socially constructed, and produced through social practices, relationships, and meanings. Building upon Lefebvre's idea, reconciliation becomes possible when communities actively reinterpret or reclaim space, challenging dominant narratives and reconfiguring how space is experienced. The Mostar Street Art Festival exemplifies this idea by transforming divided or neglected areas into sites of shared artistic expression. Through large-scale murals and public artworks, the festival generates new, positive meanings for spaces once marked by conflict. Artworks appear across both Bosniak and Croat parts of the city, encouraging physical movement, emotional engagement, and cross-ethnic interaction. In doing so, the festival helps reshape not only the urban landscape but also how locals inhabit and relate to their city.

At the same time, the festival suggests a reversed understanding of Pierre Nora's lieux de mémoire idea. While Nora viewed memory sites as static responses to fading collective memory, the Mostar Street Art Festival shows that memory can also be intentionally and actively

created in public space. The artworks do not monumentalise the past but reflect on it, referencing war, trauma, identity, and coexistence in ways that are interpretive rather than prescriptive. These murals function as living memory spaces which are open, temporary, and emotionally resonant.



*Art installations by Mark Jenkins draw attention to abandoned buildings that were destroyed by the war.*

In Sarajevo, the reconciliation efforts surrounding the reconstruction of the City Hall also reflect both Lefebvre's notion of socially produced space and a reversed understanding of Nora's lieux de mémoire idea. Like Stari Most in Mostar, the City Hall was destroyed during the war and later rebuilt through cross-ethnic and international collaboration. But beyond restoring its original Austro-Hungarian architecture, the building was reimagined as a civic and cultural hub, open to individuals of all ethnic and religious backgrounds.



*Sarajevo City Hall in August 1992, destroyed by artillery.*

Today, it functions as a platform for dialogue and mutual recognition, hosting events such as art exhibitions, public forums, and international conferences that promote peace, coexistence, and shared cultural values. In a country where many public spaces remain informally divided along ethnic lines, City Hall stands out as a neutral and inclusive venue, deliberately curated to bring diverse voices together.



*The Ars Aevi Museum of Contemporary Art opened in the City Hall to promote interculturalism.*

In line with Lefebvre's theory, the space is not merely rebuilt but socially reclaimed through collective use, generating new meanings tied to unity and coexistence. At the same time, it represents a living, intentional lieu de mémoire. It is a site where memory is not passively preserved but actively engaged with, offering space for reflection, learning, and the rebuilding of relationships. Through its architecture and public role, Sarajevo City Hall becomes a symbol of a society still healing, but committed to shaping a more inclusive and reconciled future.



*Sarajevo City Hall today, an inclusive venue of learning remembrance and rebuilding relationships.*

These post-conflict architectural efforts in Bosnia show that memory and reconciliation are not only about preserving the past but also shaping how it is lived with and transformed. The reconstruction of Stari Most, the murals of the Mostar Street Art Festival, and the reimagined Sarajevo City Hall exemplify how space can be socially produced and reclaimed as Lefebvre suggests, through everyday use, creativity, and collaboration. At the same time, they offer a reversed understanding of Nora's lieux de mémoire idea, where the architectures are not static sites of memory but intentionally created, dynamic spaces that invite reflection, dialogue, and forward-looking engagement. These sites do not simply commemorate what was lost but embody the ongoing effort to live together again, reminding us that reconciliation is as much about rebuilding space as it is about rebuilding relationships.

## **Conclusion: Living with Scars**

Nearly thirty years after the war, Bosnia and Herzegovina's architecture continues to bear witness to its complex and painful past. In Sarajevo and Mostar, buildings do more than frame daily life, they quietly preserve memory. Bullet-marked facades, patched-over walls and even ruins left to decay speak to the endurance of trauma, where formal commemoration remains absent. These structures become sites of memory, not through plaques or ceremony, but through their continued presence in the urban environment.

At the same time, memory is often erased, not through denial, but through development. Redevelopment projects like the new Razvitak department store prioritise modernisation over remembrance, replacing material scars with polished surfaces. In tourist spaces, memory can be selectively curated and compressed into a marketable narrative that risk obscuring the lived experience of the conflict.

Yet, the architecture also offers space for healing. The reconstruction of Stari Most, supported by both local and international actors, stands as a symbol of a reconciliation and shared heritage. Community-led projects, artistic interventions and even deliberate decisions to preserve damaged walls show that memory can be actively remembered, not just lost.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, memory is embedded into space, sometimes openly, sometimes beneath the surface. To walk its streets is to read a layered history, one that asks not only to be remembered, but to be understood, and remembered.



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