In Ruins: Architecture, Memory, Countermemory

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A Memorial in Exile

In July 2012, survivors of a Bosnian War–era concentration camp and killing ground at the Omarska mine declared one of the landmarks of London’s newly constructed Olympic Park a “Memorial in Exile,” standing in for the memorial for which they had been unsuccessfully advocating at the site of their imprisonment and abuse.1 Their declaration opens to reconsideration some of the predominant ways in which architecture, memory, and violence are understood.

Before the war, Omarska was part of a state-owned mining complex near the city of Prijedor. In May 1992, during mass violence in and around Prijedor, Bosnian Serb forces transformed Omarska into a camp for people expelled from the city and nearby towns and villages. When the camp was closed three months later, in response to international media pressure, an estimated 3,334 people had been held captive there, and between 700 and 800 of those prisoners had been killed.2

People were not only imprisoned and killed in Omarska; the camp also functioned as a site for the formation of political subjects. Just as the factory was a space where the modern industrialized worker was made, the mine’s functional ruin at Omarska yielded a space where citizens of socialist Yugoslavia were remade as subaltern ethnic communities of Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats.3 Ethnicity, in other words, was not only a social construction; it was also conjoined to the architectural reconstruction of a mine into a camp.

After the war, in the partition of Bosnia, Omarska was included in the Republika Srpska, a political entity whose government has refused to acknowledge both the violence that took place at Omarska and the Bosnian genocide more generally. The war continued, in other words, not least by explicit denial of its violence and implicit acceptance of its results. Postwar reconstruction has extended the war’s continuation, with the architectural history of this reconstruction exposing the blurry boundaries between wartime and postwar conditions. In 2004, Luxembourg-based Arcelor-Mittal, the world’s largest iron and steel company, purchased a 51 percent controlling share in the mining complex that included Omarska and restarted its commercial operation.4

Amid the excavation of mass graves at the complex by the International Commission on Missing Persons, some survivors and family members of victims pressed ArcelorMittal for access to Omarska so that they could hold commemorative ceremonies and construct a memorial.5 In the name of its responsibility to local “communities” and “stakeholders,” many of whom include perpetrators and beneficiaries of wartime violence, the company initially allowed access to the site for only two hours on one memorial day a year, eventually expanding that access to six days.6

In 2012, the ArcelorMittal Orbit tower was opened in London’s Olympic Park (Figure 1). Sponsored by Arcelor-Mittal, the tower was built of both recycled scrap metal and “symbolic quantities [of steel] from every continent in the world where the Company has operations.”7 The tower was funded in some specific if indeterminate way with capital accumulated at Omarska; the tower was erected on the twentieth anniversary of Omarska’s operation; the tower may have contained iron ore from the Omarska mine itself; and if material from Omarska was used in its construction, the tower also may have contained traces of some of the site’s victims.8 In collaboration with members of the Four Faces of Omarska Working Group, a collective art project investigating commemoration at Omarska; Grupa Spomenik/Monument Group,
a Yugoslav art/theory collective; DeLVe, a collective exploring intersections of art, politics, and academic research; and the Centre for Research Architecture at Goldsmiths College, University of London, Omarska survivors reappropriated the ArcelorMittal Orbit Tower both as a substitute for the banned memorial at Omarska and in anticipation of a memorial yet to come (Figure 2).9

The Omarska “Memorial in Exile” suggests that violence can be inflicted by the construction as well as the destruction of architecture; that countermonumentality can be oriented toward political resistance to subjugation as well as conceptual resistance to interpretive resolution; that countermemory can take the form of architectural displacement, negation, or absence, as well as alternative forms of architecture; and that the effects of violence can extend into the times and spaces of those who imagine themselves at great remove from it, including those who seek to write in solidarity with its victims.

Recent and contemporary scholarship on architecture, urbanism, historic preservation, public history, and landscape studies has brought sustained attention to the spatialization of violence and memory. The ruin has assumed visibility as the spatial trace of political conflict, particularly as “evidence” of or “witness” to violence.10 The monument has been assessed as a target of violence, and posed and designed as a commemoration of violence, with the countermonument emerging as a critical extension of the latter.11 Heritage has been ramified into “dissonant,” “difficult,” or “negative” forms, each advanced as a product of political conflict or violence.12 Cities have been framed as “wounded,” “dead,” or “resilient,” in each case suggesting spatial interfaces between political violence and cultural memory.13 Public space has been framed as a site, product, target, and commemoration of political contest, conflict, and violence.14 The status of the landscape as an aesthetic form has been augmented by or conjoined to its status as a medium of war and other forms of political violence.15 And the destruction of architecture, emerging as an object of study on its own terms, has been equated with the destruction of memory itself.16 On some level a response to the post–Cold War informalization of political violence in the conjoined forms of “terrorism” and “wars on terrorism,” this scholarship has also projected the intersection of space, violence, and memory back into history, producing prehistories of contemporary spatial politics.

How are we to understand the relationship of scholarship on violence and memory to the politics of violence and the politics of memory? How can accounts of violence critique the division of violence into ordinary and exceptional forms, the one rewritten as poverty, inequality, and development, and the other rewritten as emergency, trauma, and disorder? How can accounts of memory critique the division of memory into normal and pathological forms, the one conciliatory, therapeutic, and cosmopolitan and the other antagonistic, destructive, and regressive? What can histories of architecture do besides translate other preexisting histories into architectural forms and practices? And how can histories of architecture pass from a criticism of violence that is inscribed in systems of violence themselves to a critique that questions
or opposes those systems? Taking the Omarska “Memorial in Exile” as a point of departure, I will explore these questions by focusing on two of the primary ways in which architecture has been brought to bear on questions of violence and memory: first, through a discourse on architecture, memory, and wartime destruction; and second, through a discourse on architecture, countermemory, and the countermonument.

Architecture and/as Memory

Architectural historians registered the violence that accomplished the breakup of Yugoslavia through the destruction of architecture: most notably in the Old City of Dubrovnik, Croatia, and the Stari Most (Old Bridge) at Mostar, Bosnia, but also in cities and towns across Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo. They assumed the premise that this destruction—unlike the modernized and rationalized destruction supposedly inflicted by liberal democracies—could not be explained or understood in strictly strategic terms. Architectural history’s indignation and horror were thus aimed at violence directed at “architecture”: a cultural form, a repository of memory, and medium of collective identity, as opposed to a legitimate military target. In an editorial in this journal in 1993, its then editor, Nicholas Adams, termed the recent destruction in Bosnia and Croatia a “systematic targeting of architecture,” explaining that this “architecture creates home, represents memory, and preserves culture.” In a subsequent book on architecture and war that also opened with scenes of destruction from the former Yugoslavia, Robert Bevan similarly posed this destruction as “the active and often systematic destruction of particular buildings and types of architecture traditions … where the erasure of the memories, histories, and identities attached to architecture and place—enforced forgetting—is the goal itself.”

Discourse on the wartime protection and postwar preservation and reconstruction of architecture has tended to echo these claims, typically insisting on architecture as a medium of cultural memory and violence as an attack on this memory. Discussion, then, has focused on such questions as which architectural targets of violence register in accounts of that violence (monuments versus everyday structures), where the effects of this violence are experienced (communities versus individuals and families), and which types of architecture (housing versus public buildings) deserve primary attention in postconflict reconstruction.

To read the destruction of architecture in political violence as the destruction of memory, culture, and identity, however, may be to collaborate in the ideology of that violence instead of writing in solidarity with its victims. In the case of the former Yugoslavia, political violence consolidated the power of threatened regimes by being framed as a labor of memory, inflicted within longue durée histories of collective conflict—a framing that deputized representatives of ethnically defined collectives to locate themselves in these histories through contemporary acts of retribution. As I have tried to suggest elsewhere, this was less an ethnic violence than an ethnicizing violence, a violent transformation of both built environments and bodies, each recruited as media for the performance, display, and circulation of ethnic identities.

In these recruitments, collective memory, culture, and identity were epiphenomenal and ideological rather than immediate and causal. In the former Yugoslavia, the built environment offered itself as a resource for the production and reproduction of recursive temporality and historical space; it was the destruction of historic architecture—of architecture as historic—that historicized contemporary political violence, connecting past and present both for the authors of violence and for their victims. As Allen Feldman has theorized in relation to political violence in Northern Ireland, violence and memory often intertwine so that “through temporal mimesis and regression each act of violence becomes typified insofar as it participates in and takes its validity from a prior aggression.”

The status of violence as itself a mnemonic form reveals how accounts of architectural destruction revolving around the destruction of memory, culture, and identity can be scripted by acts of destruction themselves—acts that thereby solicit analysis not as unmediated revelations of authorial identity and agency but as fully designed interventions in the built environment. Daniel Bertrand Monk has thus distinguished two positions from which the spatialization of violence can be historicized, one posing this spatialization as an instantiation of politics and another posing the relation of spatialization and politics as itself the crucial object of study: “There is a significant conceptual difference between writing a history that assumes we understand, prima facie,
the workings of monuments and holy sites in the perpetuation of a conflict, and one that examines how the conflict itself has fashioned and refashioned its own explanations of the monument’s political role, in the process disclosing its own understanding of history.” In this sense, then, architecture’s historical status cannot be assumed to preexist and stand immune from the violence that ruins architecture; violence transforms not only architecture’s material and form but also its identity. Destruction imposes memory on architecture and renders architecture memorable in entirely novel ways. For whom were the destroyed mosques and churches of the former Yugoslavia repositories of memory? The political subjects of that memory were created amidst that destruction itself, at Omarska and elsewhere.

**Countermonument and Countermemory**

The positing of architecture as a repository of memory also underlies the concept of the “countermonument.” Associated primarily with James E. Young, the notion of countermonumentality is itself indebted to Pierre Nora’s formative historicization of collective memory as a social process that only with the advent of modernity required the prostheses of “external props and tangible reminders”—what Nora termed *lieux de mémoire*—to function. For Young, as for Nora, monuments, “in shouldering the memory work … may relieve viewers of their memory burdens.” The critical task for a monument, then, is to work against this relief and deliver this burden back to the human subject to whom it properly belongs. Young proposed the term “countermonument” as a description of monuments that fulfill this task and “return the burden of memory to visitors themselves by forcing visitors into an active role.” The effect of a countermonument, Young therefore writes, should be to leave “nothing but the visitors themselves standing in remembrance, left to look inward for memory”—a temporary return to what Nora described as the prehistorical *milieu de mémoire.*

If the destruction of architecture could be a destruction of memory, then the construction of the countermonument suggests itself as a construction of countermemory. In the context of the countermonument, countermemory defines itself through its “perpetual irresolution”—an irresolution that is necessary to guarantee the “life of memory.” As Young writes, “The countermonument reminds us that the best German memorial to the fascist era and its victims may not be a single memorial at all—but simply the never-to-be-resolved debate over which kind of memory to preserve, how to do it, in whose name, and to what end.” What is at stake in the countermonument, then, is the perpetuation of memory.

In post-Yugoslavia, the political possibilities of the countermonument have been explored and transformed in a number of contexts. For Young, however, these possibilities are encapsulated in a “never-to-be-resolved debate” about the past that the countermonument should initiate and maintain. While Young opposes this debate to sheer forgetting, the debate can also be opposed to political action; the political horizon of unresolved debates, that is, is the horizon of liberal-democratic politics, a politics focused on the containment of dissensus and concomitant denial of desire or need for systemic change. The memories that the countermonument renders unresolved are in this sense not easily available to and for politics.

The version of countermemory that animates the countermonument can usefully be contrasted with the version that has emerged from the work of Michel Foucault. For Foucault, countermemory is not interpretively unresolved but politically subjugated, actively and explicitly repressed or denied—a version of the “local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges” that sanctioned histories “filter, hierarchise and order … in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what constitutes a science and its objects.” If discourse on the countermonument suggests a countermemory that is permanently open to discussion, renegotiation, and contestation, discourse on countermemory suggests contestation with oppressive regimes of power. In “What is an Author?,” Foucault writes of “returning to those empty spaces that have been marked by omission or concealed in false and misleading plentitudes.” The countermonument formalizes “empty spaces” through techniques of disappearance, erasure, and temporariness—techniques that might not present absent memory as much as represent present memory in novel forms. By contrast, the historian of countermemory as subjugated memory might return to the ruined, the as-yet-unbuilt, and the unbuildable, as well as—or perhaps even instead of—what is built precisely in order to disappear.

**Architecture, Memory, Politics**

“Is it possible to think about a memorial from the perspective of those whose knowledge and experience has been excluded and disqualified and is not part of the public remembrance?” This question, posed by the Four Faces of Omarska Working Group, explicitly rewrites the countermonument as a project in subjugated countermemory. Emerging from this rewriting, the “Memorial in Exile” suggests a number of ways in which countermemory might function as desubjugation. The memorial embodies a refusal to occupy the given space of protest at the site of subjugation and violence in
Omarska; a refusal to recognize the given partition of postwar “peace” from wartime violence; a refusal to receive the given politics of oblivion scripted as postwar “reconciliation”; a refusal to acknowledge the given interpretation of the ArcelorMittal Orbit tower as an Olympic symbol; and a refusal to accept the given denial of the commemoration of a site of mass violence. With these refusals, the survivors of Omarska became political subjects of memory as opposed to victims of memory politics.

The critical historian might not only learn from the historical analyses that led to the proposal of the “Memorial in Exile”; the memorial also speaks to the alliances that can be drawn between countermemory and critical history and between the project of critical historicization and the production of political events. The “Memorial in Exile” insists on critique as a claim to be governed otherwise. This insistence offers a horizon for the work of critical history. The historical mediations of indignation, denunciation, horror, and even difference here become thresholds to political intervention in solidarity with the subjugated.

Notes

1. I am indebted to members of Grupa Spomenik/Monument Group and the Four Faces of Omarska Working Group, in particular Milica Tomić and Branimir Stojanović, from whom I have learned much about monuments, politics, and memory.
3. “From Hegel, through Nietzsche, to Lukács and Foucault, the formation of the body has been treated as the formation of the political subject. For all these theorists this formation has been linked to specific spaces and spatial relations”; see Allen Feldman, Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 9.
4. ArcelorMittal purchased the mining complex at Omarska as part of its general strategy of acquiring privatized state-owned enterprises in postsocialist Eastern Europe, where the company has taken advantage of weak environmental regulation and labor protection to extract profits in an industry with increasing global overcapacity.
The Detention-Industrial Complex in Australia

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It doesn’t matter whether you’re a child, it doesn’t matter whether you’re pregnant, it doesn’t matter whether you’re a woman, it doesn’t matter whether you’re an unaccompanied minor, it doesn’t matter if you have a health condition, if you’re fit enough to get on a boat then you can expect you’re fit enough to end up in offshore processing.¹

—Scott Morrison, Australian minister of immigration

Situated 800 kilometers from the capital of Papua New Guinea, the Manus Island Regional Processing Centre is a remote outpost far from the political dispatches of the Australian government in Canberra. Manus Island became an active base for US soldiers during World War II. Littered throughout the area are dilapidated Quonset huts first erected on the site by the Americans; some of these structures are still being salvaged to house new detainees and offices. Along the island’s first paved road connecting the airport to the detention center, building contractors ensured that the footprint of the former military base was reused. Located on state land, the current detention facility on Manus is a collection of enclosed compounds in which canvas tents, shipping containers, and other prefabricated units have been erected on flood-prone terrain (Figure 1). Two prominent entry points guarded by men with machine guns are located behind at least three additional layers of chain-link fencing. Between each of the compounds is a narrow corridor that reduces interactions among detainees. At the heart of the center stand two long elevated prefabricated buildings whose windows have been obscured by plastic tarpaulin; a small sign indicates that the shower, toilet, and entertainment area are nearby.

More striking, however, is the initial sitework under way for a purported 10,000-person detention facility at the heart of Manus Island cut from the jungle near the village of Lorengau (Figure 2); this administrative center has been described as the future “first stop” for asylum seekers.

26. Ibid., 102.
27. Ibid., 92.
28. Ibid., 119.
30. The term “countermemory” emerged in the theoretical lexicon with conjoined authorial and ontological instabilities that have marked its subsequent discursive career; consistently identified with Michel Foucault, particularly in the context of the English translation of a series of his essays and interviews in Language, Counter-Memory, Practice, the term was evidently coined by that book’s editor, Donald F. Bouchard, and does not appear in any of Foucault’s writing collected in the book. On Bouchard’s reasons for employing the term, see Donald F. Bouchard, preface to Michel Foucault, Language, Counter-Memory, Practice, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 8–9.
34. Four Faces of Omarska Working Group, “Statement.”