Article

When Cultural Demolition Is an Objective of War

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Tim Slade’s film describes how assaults against a society’s infrastructure lead to the annihilation of its people

The history and culture of a people are not just preserved in their written texts. They are also housed in the physical structures that shelter them and mark their existence in the world. Residences, communal spaces, places of business, and other edifices serve as functional monuments of a society. When these monuments are marked for demolition in wartime, the ultimate aim is to erase a group of people from space, and time, and remove the memory of their identity.

Great Colonnade, columns. Palmyra, Syria. Source: Vyacheslav Argenberg via Wikimedia Commons.

This is the argument made in Robert Bevan’s book *Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War* (University of Chicago Press, 2006) and the 2016 documentary that it inspired. Directed by Tim Slade of Vast Productions, the film takes us to the ruins of Palmyra, the Ferhadija mosque in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Dresden, and other war-stricken areas. The film reveals each community’s attempts to rebuild in the aftermath of conflict. It also reveals the tragedy of facing the the reality that once destroyed, some things can never be fully

reconstructed.

> ***One of the ways to get rid of history is to remove all the physical trace of history and make believe that nothing ever happened, nothing was ever there. You can't find artifacts, you can't find anything, because everything has vanished.***
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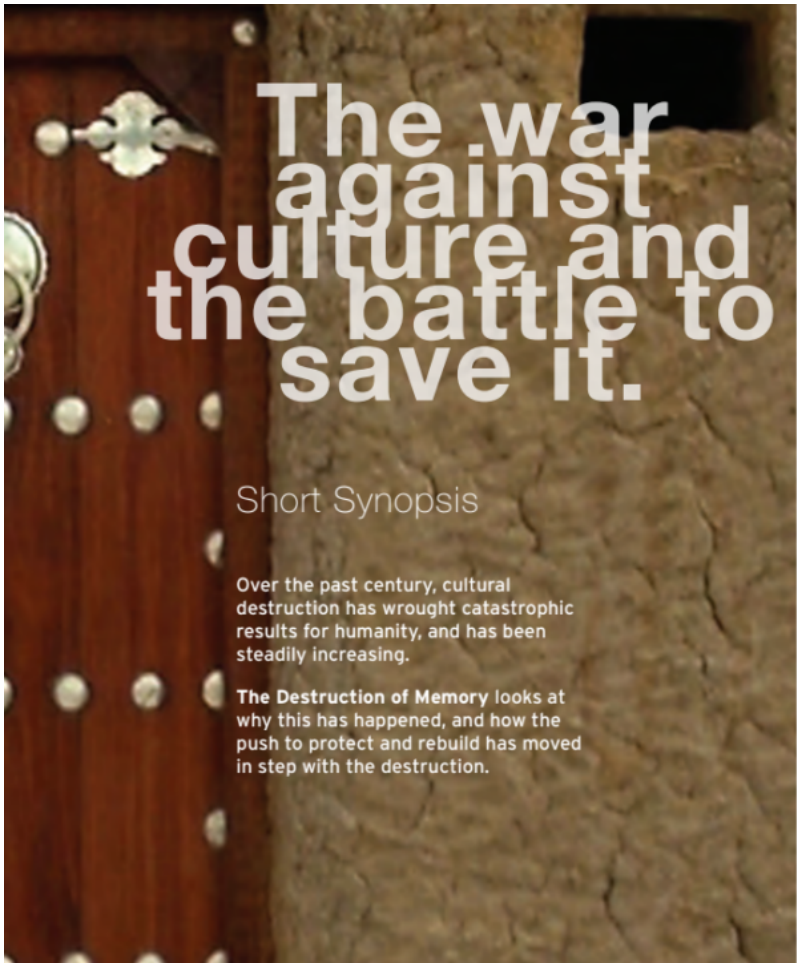
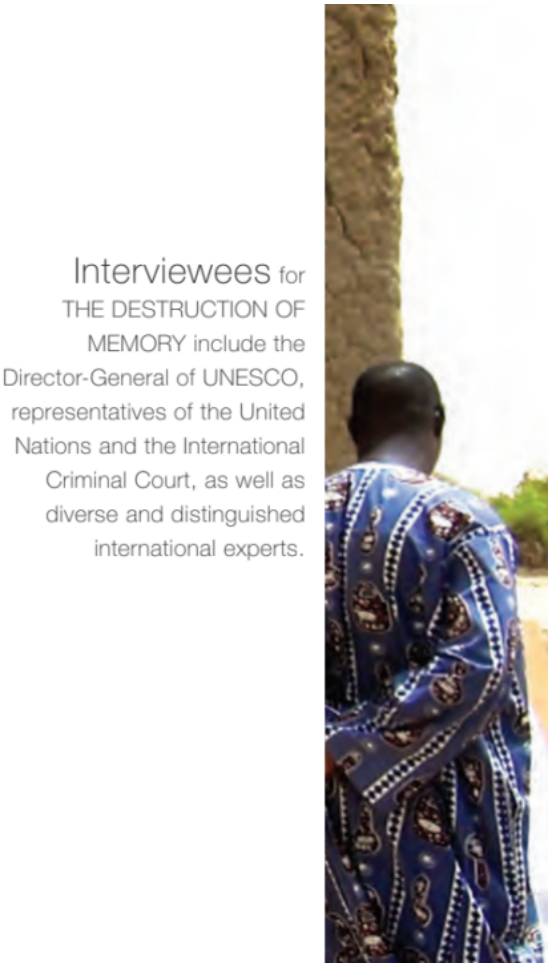
> **—*Architect Daniel Libeskind in* The Destruction of Memory.**

A Film About "The War Against Culture"





As suggested by the tagline, “the war against culture and the battle to save it”, the film shows that war is not just fought on the physical front. It is also waged culturally and psychologically – as exemplified in in the scenes that discuss the demolition of the Ferhadija Mosque in Banja Luka, which was demolished when Muslims were expelled by Serbian Nationalists during the Bosnian War (1992-1995). The Bosnian genocide took place during this conflict when thousands of Bosnian Muslims were killed and over one million were displaced. It was the first widely documented genocide of the 21st century.

The Book That Inspired the Film

Author Robert Bevan notes in the introduction to the second edition of the book that the Bosnian War was the impetus for its writing. In his interview with the creators of the documentary, he notes, “It was only in the beginning of the Bosnian War that it clicked into place: an attack on the culture of a people is a way of attacking their identity as a group, and architecture becomes a proxy by which attacks can be fought. “

The following excerpt from the book’s introduction has been reproduced here with permission from Robert Bevan and Reaktion Books:

> ***“The levelling of buildings and cities has always been an inevitable part of conducting hostilities and has worsened as weaponry has become heavier and more destructive, from the slings and arrows of the past to the daisy cutters of today. Continents rather than cities can be devastated. This damage may be the direct result of military manoeuvres to gain territory or root out a foe, or a desire to wipe out the enemy’s capacity to fight. The division of the spoils also plays a part. But there has always been another war against architecture – the destruction of the cultural artefacts of an enemy people or nation as a means of dominating, terrorizing, dividing or eradicating it altogether. The aim here is not the rout of an opposing army – it is a tactic often conducted well***

> ***away from any front line – but the pursuit of ethnic cleansing or genocide by other means, or the rewriting of history in the interests of a victor reinforcing his conquests. Here architecture takes on a totemic quality: a mosque, for example, is not simply a mosque; it represents to its enemies the presence of a community marked for erasure. A library or art gallery is a cache of historical memory, evidence that a given community's presence extends into the past and legitimizing it in the present and on into the future. In these circumstances structures and places with certain meanings are selected for oblivion with deliberate intent. This is not 'collateral damage'. This is the active and often systematic destruction of particular building types or architectural traditions that happens in conflicts where the erasure of the memories, history and identity attached to architecture and place – enforced forgetting – is the goal itself. These buildings are attacked not because they are in the path of a military objective: to their destroyers they are the objective."***
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> ***—Robert Bevan, "Introduction: The Enemies of Architecture and Memory," in* Destruction of Memory: The Architecture of War.**

As renewed concerns about the growth of nationalism and the targeting of vulnerable

populations throughout the world, *The Destruction of Memory* is a powerful reminder of the various ways the humanity of a people can be attacked—and the responsibility of the world community to respond whenever these assaults occur.