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## **LA CITTÀ GLOBALE**

La condizione urbana  
come fenomeno pervasivo

## **THE GLOBAL CITY**

The urban condition  
as a pervasive phenomenon



INSIGHTS

1

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The urban condition  
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a cura di

Marco Pretelli  
Rosa Tamborrino  
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# THE RECONSTRUCTION OF CITIES AFTER THE DESTRUCTION OF WAR: FROM THE EXACT REPRODUCTION TO THE EXALTATION OF THE RUIN. A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE CASES OF MÜNSTER, KASSEL, LE HAVRE, HAMBURG AND BELCHITE IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY

ROSARIO DEL CAZ ENJUTO, ALICIA SAINZ ESTEBAN,  
JOSE LUIS SAINZ GUERRA

## *Abstract*

*There are many ways to rebuild cities after the destruction of war, depending on the intensity of the destruction, the economic, political and social situation and the authority doing the rebuildings, as well as the technicians who intervened and the theory and practice that guided the planning. This paper aims to classify the types of reconstruction that took place in the European post-war period, analysing five case studies: Münster, Kasseland, Hamburg, Le Havre and Belchite.*

## *Keywords*

*War destruction; Reconstruction; City*

## **Introduction**

### *Objective of the paper*

The objective of this document is to analyze the behavior of the different agents that intervene in cities when it comes to rebuilding an urban area destroyed by war. What effects does the destruction of the city have on the population? What are the criteria used when planning the intervention in the war torn area? Why, in some cases, is a completely new reconstruction chosen, while in others the ruin is maintained?

### *The means of destruction*

The dizzying evolution of the means of destruction in the twentieth century gave rise to increasingly frightening results. In WWII the allies devised the bombing of cities by means of incendiary bombs that resulted in fire everywhere, the so-called Firestorm. A

fire that encompassed the whole city, in which the wooden structures of the medieval buildings burned, had the advantage for the attackers that, with several hundred tons of bombs, millions of tons of wood from the Medieval buildings and other materials (such as furniture, books, clothing, food, etc.) all went up in flame, with an extraordinary multiplier effect. With relatively small means, an extraordinary amount of damage was achieved [Friedrich 2018, 103].

### *Destruction as (divine) punishment*

The people begin to quantify and assimilate the extent of the damage in lives and property immediately after such an attack. It is at this point when the idea of punishment arises, at times marred by the religious nuances of biblical punishment and, in others, the punishment deserved and explained as a response to similar actions of their own army. The biblical interpretations of destruction as a divine punishment leads to a more diffuse and general guilt, in which the lack of morals, bad habits and the licentious life of the population provoke punishment. The so-called operation “Gomorrah”, the bombing by the British of Hamburg, tries to take advantage of this idea; so the British aviation, with that name, defines itself as the hand of God that punishes the city of sin. The bombing of the RAF appropriates the biblical image of the lava rain falling from the sky. One thing is certain and that is that the total destruction of the German cities is the closest image to the Biblical phrase “until not one stone remains standing”. In these cases, the story of misfortune is mixed by the people in different ways: first of all there is the idea of a *just war*, also an *inevitable war* and next to it the idea of punishment, humiliation, together with others related to *guilt* and *sin*. The destruction produced by war takes on meanings that are mixed with the very causes of the war and its justification, which also includes the way in which the reconstruction is carried out.

### *What was destroyed*

The war led to the annihilation of entire sectors of the cities. The city, taken partially or totally, was the military objective. Initially, the declared objectives were those that had military importance: barracks, armaments factories or key infrastructures in the transport of troops. But the reality is that, after the attacks, the destruction was total. In the second world war, residential, civilian and military buildings, infrastructures, streets, bridges, supply and sanitation networks, gas and electricity networks, were all destroyed [Friedrich 2002, 521-522]. The civilian population was the main victim, either as a direct objective (though not admitted, or assumed as a way to weaken the enemy), or as collateral damage from the main objective.

## The reconstruction

### *The different forms of reconstruction*

We have identified five forms of reconstruction with five examples of cities. We have chosen these cases, but there are others that are very similar:

1. *Identical reconstruction* (Münster, Germany), which looks to recreate the city that had been bombed, reconstructing the destroyed buildings as they were before. In this case, there is clearly a political interest in minimizing the enemy's action to show the population the possibility of rebuilding what had been destroyed.
2. *Reconstruction as a reference to the old city* (Kassel, Germany), in which the new city makes references to what had previously existed, rather like a literary reference, partially improving it and taking advantage of the "opportunity" of the destruction, based on the previous criticisms put forward prior to the war. The result is a modern space that remembers what was there before.
3. *The corrected city* (Hamburg, Germany), in which the destruction is seen as an "opportunity" to address the reforms that were tried so many times without success and that, despite everything, had previously been intensely demanded.
4. *New construction erasing the traces of the past, or tabula rasa reconstruction* (Le Havre, France), is justified through the poor quality of the city that had been destroyed, with the convenience of constructing a new city following the criteria of new trends in architecture and urbanism; coinciding partially with the postulates of the Modern Movement, with new architecture, a new urban form, new materials, new building typologies, etc.
5. *The maintenance and exaltation of the ruin* (Belchite, Spain), in which the remains of the buildings destroyed by the war are preserved as a document of war propaganda, while the new city is built beside it. With the conservation of the ruin, the aim is to blame and expose the brutality of the enemy; in other cases, the ruin is maintained to give historical depth.

Through these examples, we analyze the different elements that influence the final result, the importance of urban history, the theory and practice of architecture and planning and the conflict with the political interests of the moment. None of the examples is pure, but a mixture of all of them, although in each case one of the aspects dominates and by this it is finally identified.

## The reconstruction of the identical city

### *The destruction of war*

The destruction of Münster, Germany, was the result of the massive bombing of the allies. At the end of the war, the destruction of the historic center was evaluated at around 90%. The identical reconstruction of the Prinzipalmarkt area of the city of Münster was carried out because of its recognized value as a townscape. The aim was to recuperate the city that had existed prior to the bombings, at least in that area, with the faithful reconstruction of the destroyed buildings as they had been prior to the bombings. In this case, the political interest in erasing, or at least minimizing, the action of the enemy obliges them to restore what was there before, so that the citizens could recognize the previous landscape, however expensive this may turn out to be, showing it as an example of a future in which the damage has been canceled out (even though this is illusory).



### *The reconstruction*

The most important idea of the reconstruction was to maintain the image of the “Great Masquerade”, that is, to reproduce the exceptional urban landscape formed by the facades of the market street, as this was the name for the set of bourgeois houses in the Prinzipalmarkt. The objective of the reconstruction was to achieve an identical reconstruction of the space, though it can be said that they did not entirely achieve this goal. Proof of this lies in the comparison of historical photographs and those taken immediately after the reconstruction, and to an even greater extent, if we compare them with the current reality in detail. A detailed analysis of the facades shows how to build using modern systems. The reconstruction followed the general form that existed previously, but reinterpreted with new construction systems. Where there had been solid stone, a stone cladding was placed. The moldings, cornices and finials that were part of the ornaments that crowned the gables were simplified or eliminated. In this way, it was possible to maintain its historical character and an overall image similar to that which existed in the old market. Despite this, only a careful look can appreciate the work that went into the reconstruction. Many buildings have been modified in a subtle way, others have renounced the most important ornaments or reproduced them in a simplified way. Nevertheless, an image very close to that of the pre-war state has largely been achieved (Fig. 1).



1: Prinzipalmarkt, Münster, the identical reconstruction [Photo of José Luis Sainz Guerra].

In the Münster example, what we see is the purpose of the identical reconstruction, which was attempted in a very small area of the city, of exceptional value for its inhabitants. This solution is found particularly in medium-sized cities, with technicians in the town planning administration who share their ideals with a conservative bourgeoisie [Beyme 1992, 18].

## The referred reconstruction

### *The destruction*

As in other German examples, the city of Kassel was destroyed by massive bombings, of which the most important and definitive took place in October, 1943.

### *The reconstruction*

In Kassel the start-up of the reconstruction was delayed, the war ended and after a long process of delays, the reconstruction took place from 1951 with the active participation of different institutions with public funds. The influence in the form of intervention of the “Constructa” fair in Hannover was important [Lüken-Isbemer 1992, 264]. The final result materialized in the old, medieval quarter (*Altstadt*), which had been completely destroyed and was rebuilt as an exclusively residential area, respecting the layout of the old streets, widening their width, vaguely maintaining some of its formal characteristics



2: Kassel, a street dressed up with historical robes [Photo of José Luis Sainz Guerra].

(its curved shape, some corners or breaks). A street was incorporated, of sufficient width to create the connection with the bridge (Kurt Schumacher street), which cuts the center in half, based on pre-war ideas. The shape of the new blocks modified the existing ones, emptying the entire interior of each block and incorporating large interior patios, with well-ventilated and illuminated houses, far from the overcrowding and lack of hygiene of the previous buildings. However, these new buildings incorporated elements in the facades that remotely recalled the previous ones. Sloping roofs with the gable ends crowning the facade and the dormer windows on the roofs, creating an image of traditional German architecture (Fig. 2).

Some authors have indicated that the reconstructed space «was, without doubt, a modern quarter using new materials and new systems of composition, which were being dressed up with “historical” robes» [Fischer 2018, 115]. The reconstruction of the *Altstadt* of Kassel is an operation to reinvent the city, one that follows some of the guidelines of National Socialism. The architectural style is used to establish a politically valuable link with what once existed and had been destroyed. It is a memory that does not have to be exact, only referring to the forms and languages of the past and, at the same time, recreating a deformed past.

## The corrected city

### *The destruction*

The city of Hamburg was destroyed in 1943 by the bombs, especially the incendiary bombs. After WWII, the destruction of the city was seen as the opportunity to improve traffic in the city and the destruction of the center, in particular, made it possible to open up a street that crossed the center from east to west, thus avoiding the passage of traffic through the port area to the south, or around the line of the old walls by the north zone. East-West Street (Ost-West Strasse) was opened, taking advantage of the cheaper cost of acquiring the land due to the destruction of most of the houses in the center, which would have been unthinkable a few years before. The opening of the street was indeed easier and the historical photos show the new roadway, between the empty lots and the ruins of what had been the city center. The buildings were constructed later and the presence of the old plots is still apparent. This kind of intervention has left a clear mark on the current street: the buildings on both sides do not form parallel facades, different widths are common because of the old plots and the buildings are built in different styles. The towers of the churches of St. Michaelis and St. Nikolai also make up a dreamlike landscape because of its bad or inexistent relationship with the open street that passes at a tangent to its walls. The design of the edges of the street and its relationship with buildings, using various mechanisms (setbacks, arcades, gardens, etc.) shows the resulting lack of control of space. The different sizes of buildings break the scale of the historic city [Wawoczny 1996, 229]. All these elements clearly show the street's traumatic origin. The Ost-West Strasse clearly shows the nature of its open wound in the heart of the city and what we see today is the scar (Fig. 3).



3: The Ost-West Straße, Hamburg, show its traumatic origin [Photo of José Luis Sainz Guerra].

## The new construction erasing the traces of the past

### *The destruction*

The city of Le Havre, in France, was destroyed in WWII by the action of the allies and the Germans, who bombed the city in the course of attacks and counterattacks. The clean slate reconstruction is justified by the poor quality of the destroyed city, the intensity of the destruction and the use of the occasion for the construction of a new city following the criteria of renovating trends in architecture and urbanism.

### *The plan*

After the war, the French State commissioned, Auguste Perret, to rebuild the most damaged area. There, Perret deployed a proposal reinforcing the regular urban fabric, vaguely following the general disposition of the preceding city. The proposal is summarized in two axes that cross like *cardus* and *decamanus*. Avenues are created on the edges in the shape of a maritime front. In the center, the main avenue is reinforced, culminating in the Main Square.

### *The architect August Perret and his architecture.*

However, the great protagonist is the architecture of Auguste Perret and the large team that worked at his command, based on a reinterpretation of architectural language,

bringing into being an architectural order that uses the filter of new materials, such as prefabricated reinforced concrete and its industrial use. «Perret [...] spontaneously identifies the concrete framework (which is a constructive fact) with the volumetric framework and transposes the demands and spatial associations of the second over the first» [Benevolo 1974, 373]. Perret converts his architecture into a language that is close to neoclassicism (Fig. 4).

«The architect who, without betraying the constraints of a modern building program, nor the use of modern materials, creates a work that will always seem to have existed, that is, in a word, “banal”, is entitled to feel content» [Briton 2001, 187].

More important than the rejection of the city of the past and what it meant, is the creation of the city of the future based on new materials and social needs, thus leading to its “banality”.

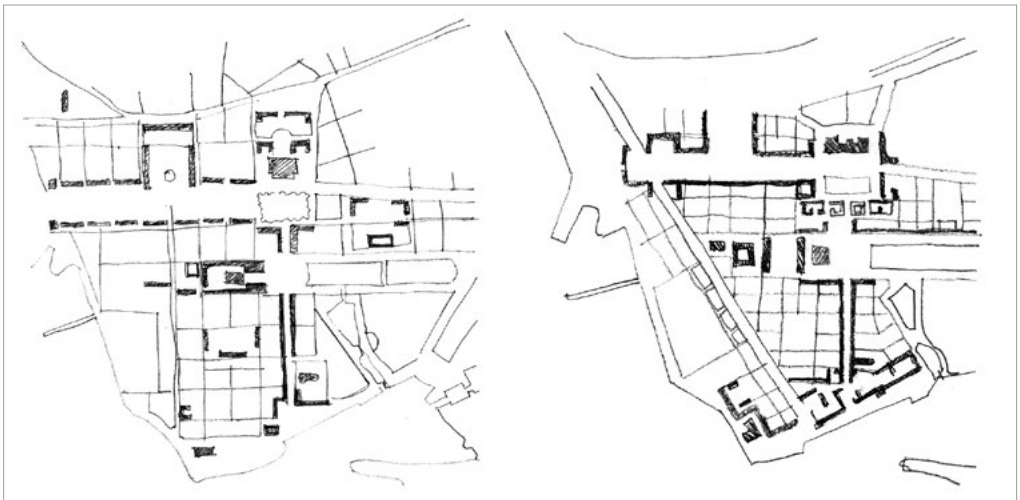
## Maintenance and exaltation of the ruin

### *The destruction of the town of Belchite in Spain's civil war*

Belchite was destroyed in August and September of 1937, in one of the most important battles of the Spanish Civil War. The Franco administration prohibited the reconstruction of the ruins and built a new, modern town next to the old one, called Nuevo Belchite, to house its inhabitants.

### *The maintenance of the ruin as a political value*

The aim of maintaining the ruin was political and sought to highlight the brutality of the enemy, to counteract the effect that the bombing of Guernica by the Condor Legion a few months earlier was having worldwide [Michonneau 2017, 97]. The ruin of the destroyed town is monumentalized as a testimony of «Marxist barbarism» [Barquero 1988, 23].



4: Le Havre. Comparison of the initial and final project. Source: José Luis Sainz Guerra.



5: Belchite, the exaltation of the ruin [Photo of Antonio Álvaro Tordesillas].

The propagandistic objective of the maintaining the ruin soon became evident, since the ruin was forgotten when the political urgency changed. The result is that the ruin has deteriorated with the passage of time and the lack of care has caused the gradual disappearance of many of the remains. Ruins, just like new buildings, must be conserved. That is, they have to be cleaned, undergoing periodic repairs and the removal of undergrowth, because the vegetation that grows spontaneously has to be removed, the erosion by the wind and rain has to be repaired and protected, and when the ruin is not conserved, little by little it deteriorates and finally disappears. Such is the case of Belchite, where the lack of conservation and maintenance of the ruins brought about its gradual deterioration. The looting of construction materials, facilitated by corruption, also contributed [Michonneau 2017, 84]. Until its official declaration as a heritage site in 2002, the town and its ruined buildings were not included in the protection system of Spain's historical heritage law (Fig. 5).

## Conclusions

The destruction of European cities by war is a great collective trauma, which produced millions of victims and destroyed resources, material objects and intangible elements, such as the urban landscape, and with it the identity of the population, giving rise to the

idea of “the lost city”, the feeling that appears in the private and public sphere in different societies that have suffered destruction. “The lost city” means not only the walls, the buildings, but also the loss of memory, of the landscape, of the collective identity. Memory is lost, because buildings and historical cities, when preserved, act as historical documents. In the face of destruction, there is a range of responses which depend on societies; answers that go from the conservation of the ruins, through the faithful reconstruction of the past or the construction of an entirely new city.

The politics of the moment is an essential element that directs the reconstruction process. With the reconstruction, the political messages prior to the war are transmitted and modified. The reconstruction is based on the criticism of the city before the war, in the different themes that led the debates: on the one hand, the identification of society with some urban landscapes and the reference to the architectural tradition; on the other, the improvement of housing in the consolidated space, the quality of construction work, and traffic. A new element is the reconstruction of a city less vulnerable to air attacks.

The great idea of reconstruction is to take advantage of the opportunity that destruction offers to rethink the city from the beginning, thus making radical renewal possible.

Finally, alongside the reconstruction, comes the affirmation of the return to life and with it the reference to the human body, with such concepts as the “wound” or the “scar”, which destruction and reconstruction have caused<sup>1</sup>.

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