The Basel Peace Forum 2019 intended to inspire new and unconventional ideas for peacebuilding. About 200 decision-makers from business, diplomacy, academia and civil society from 30 countries met on 13 and 14 January in Basel to rethink peace. Linkages between peacebuilding and health and migration, architecture, digitalization, impact investing as well as risk analysis took center stage.

# RECONSTRUCTING PEACE? ARCHITECTURE BETWEEN TRANSIENCE AND PERMANENCE
## CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE INNOVATION FORUM "BUILDING PEACE? THE FRAGILE SIDE OF ARCHITECTURE"

by Dominik Balthasar

## OVERVIEW

*There is nascent, but increasing recognition that the built environment surrounding societies not only exerts a physical, cognitive, and emotional impact on its members, but also affects the allocation of power within societies as well as between societies and their respective states. As such, architecture and urban planning can either foster or frustrate a society's quest for peace and stability. What is less clear, though, is how the deliberate shaping of the physical environment impacts trajectories of peace and conflict. Under what conditions do what kinds of architecture produce societal collaboration, rather than competition, and what parts of the 'architecture & peace' equation can be adjusted to nurture peace, rather than war? A particular challenge lies in squaring the circle of the simultaneous transience and permanence characteristic of many war-torn societies – a challenge that constituted a major theme of the innovation forum.*

## RECITALS

The workshop's first input was provided by **Joseph Daher, a social activist and lecturer at the University of Lausanne,** who shed light on the reconstruction dynamics in contemporary Syria. In his presentation, Joseph emphasized the **political character of physical reconstruction projects, and drew the audience's attention to the legal framework that has evolved under the aegis of the Syrian government since the onset of the civil war in 2012**. According to the expert's account, Decree 66 (09/2012) and Decree 10 (07/2018) provide the governmental authorities in Damascus with far-reaching powers that allow infringing on prevailing property rights. In line with last year's expert input provided by Malkit Shoshan, **Joseph argued for the need for reconstruction processes being based on human rights, broad inclusion, and local participation, if structural injustices and conflict are not to be perpetuated.**

Subsequently, **Manuel Herz, an architect and professor at the University of Basel,** shared some of

his insights pertaining to Sahrawi refugee camps in south-western Algeria. **In his talk, Manuel challenged the notion of refugee camps being places of misery, suffering, passivity, and third party control. Instead, the speaker depicted how refugee camps can also exist in form of quasi-stabilized, permanent, and urbanized settlements that exhibit significant degrees of political autonomy and agency.** In the context of the Sahrawi refugee camps, architecture is infused with strong political messages, which, on the one hand, honour the permanency of the refuge, but, on the other hand, also allude to its temporality. Manuel's input also echoed a central message of the preceding Basel Peace Forum, in that he highlighted, along the lines of the Syrian Architect Marwa Al-Sabouni, who attended the forum in the last two years, that the built environment not only acts as a mirror to the communities that inhabit it, but may even foreshadow a society's political trajectory.

## CORE IDEA 1

In contrast to the discussions that had evolved in the 'architecture & peace' innovation forum during previous Basel Peace Forum, this year's debates circled significantly less around questions of physical destruction and the socio-political repercussions that come with it. Instead, both expert and participant inputs lent considerably more weight to the more programmatic issue of (re-)construction. **Thereby, a core idea that surfaced repeatedly was that the (re-)building of physical infrastructure should not contend itself with the aim of providing secure shelter, but needs to put the objective of (re-)establishing the war-torn social fabric much more at centre stage.** In order to do so, a delicate balance between spaces for privacy and community needs to be found. At a more abstract level, there was broad recognition of the political nature of processes of (re-)construction. Throughout the debates, **it was highlighted how political processes shape the built environment, and how the latter literally cements power plays for generations to come – for better, or for worse.**

## CORE IDEA 2

**A novel element that entered this year's 'architecture & peace' exchange revolves around the simultaneity of transient and permanent aspects of the built environment.** While, in the context of violent conflict and displacement, the built environment is strongly subjected to elements of transition and temporality, the permanent manifestation of the latter is likely to create both new challenges and opportunities for post-war (re-)construction endeavours. Transitional structures that have, over time, acquired a status of permanence act, for example, as a constant reminder of past injustices, thus hindering rather than helping reconciliation. Being aware of the tensions created by the temporality-permanence-nexus constitutes an important aspect in processes of (re-)building the physical and political environment. In a similar vein, there exists a tension between the need for quick solutions to provide shelter and a functional physical infrastructure, and the much more long-drawn process of (re-)negotiating trust and the use of space amongst different parts of society. Hence, the question becomes in how far more flexible, organic approaches to (re-)construction can be developed and applied so as to not prioritize one aspect over the other. **Ultimately, squaring this circle ties back to the underlying idea for the need of designing (re-)construction processes in a broad-based, inclusive fashion in order to ensure the buy-in at the part of local communities.**

## REFLECTIONS & POTENTIAL FOR DEVELOPMENT

Although it appears to be received wisdom not to leave the reconstruction of war-torn spaces to urban planners and (victorious) political elites, but to include both local policy- and law-makers and representatives of the general public, this postulation raises a number of issues. **First, such an approach not only assumes that national elites, and the social, political, and economic power they hold, can be 'contained' by the general public, but also tends to romanticize community-driven processes.** While there are important arguments to be made in favour of locally owned and participatory (re-) construction processes being more sustainable, they are not immune to politics – and the potential for marginalization that come with it – either. Moreover, while such bottom-up processes may be suitable for particular communities, it remains unclear of how such fragmented processes relate to broader (re-)construction efforts, in which aspects of coordination between such processes assume a central role.

**On a more fundamental level, there remain important questions to ask how the relationship between the built environment and issues of peace and conflict really work.** Under what conditions are these causally linked, and what kind of levers exist for which kind of actors to influence this relationship? While it is certainly true that built environments exert a physical, cognitive, and emotional impact on its inhabitants, one should be wary of invoking a deterministic relationship between the built environment and socio-political trajectories, as this glosses over individuals' and societies' ingenuity and creativity to surmount prevailing challenges. In light of the fact that the built environment is largely reflective of past and present power relationships within society, it remains a crucial question if and how the physical infrastructure can be established in such ways as to keep pace with – and possibly anticipate and mitigate – societies' continuously changing socio-political context.

**Exploring the intersection of architecture and peace in general, and the tensions created by different temporalities and geographies appears as challenging as promising to (re-)construct more peaceful societies.**

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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\*      Danielle Lalive d'Epinay of lalive moderation, facilitated the innovation forum.