An emerging group of scholars and practitioners is concerned with building peace - literally. The relationship between architecture and urban planning on the one side, and peace and conflict on the other, has increasingly been acknowledged. After all, the built environment does not only reflect a physical structure, but also manifests social, economic, and political factors that form part of a society’s daily life, giving meaning to places and helping form identities. While, for example, divided cities are key sites in territorial conflicts over state and national identities, cultures, and borders, the architecture of buildings can facilitate or hinder human interaction. Consequently, the built environment can serve as a powerful lens to understand and shape behaviour. Exploring this link and seeking sustainable options to facilitate peace through architecture and urban planning lies at the heart of the architecture-and-peace nexus.

The workshop was kicked off by Malkit Shoshan, author of the award-winning book ‘Atlas of the conflict: Israel-Palestine’ and founder and director of the architectural think tank FAST, which investigates the relationship between architecture, urban planning, and human rights in conflict and post-conflict spaces. In her presentation, Malkit pointed to the important links between the built environment and questions of peace and conflict, and explored the issue of border and bordering and their relationship with spatial segregation in particular. A key message of her contribution lay in the argument that architecture is not only technical, but highly political, and that processes of reconstruction should, thus, not only be geared at providing shelter, but home. Her presentation was followed by an input of Marwa Al-Sabouni, a Syrian architect and author of the internationally acclaimed book ‘The Battle for Home’. Providing insights on the role of architecture in the onset and aftermath of the violent conflict in Syria. Marwa highlighted that the state of the built environment acts as a mirror to the communities that inhabit it. Even more, she suggested that the urban design of Syrian cities, which had evolved considerably since the time of colonialization, foreshadowed the war in the sense that old communal structures and shared spaces had been replaced by constructions geared at individualism and segregation. The workshop was moderated by Danielle Lalive d’Epinay of lalive moderation.
CORE IDEAS 1 & 2

Long conceived of as purely technical in nature, there is increasing recognition that architecture and urban planning are highly political. Existing structures of buildings and their connection amongst each other (i.e. infrastructure) reflect political choices made at the part of a society in general, and those of its elite more particularly. In turn, however, changes in the built environment, whether incremental or sudden, can alter prevailing power relations within society, its self-image, and modalities of its members’ interaction. The case of Medellin, Colombia, might be instructive in this regard. Its erstwhile geophysical separation had resulted in political segregation, which contributed to turning the city into one of the most dangerous urban spaces in the world. With the introduction of a cable car infrastructure in 2004, which, literally, bridged the gap between formerly divided neighbourhoods, the city’s population became more connected – and more peaceful. If it is true that the built environment affects socio-political dynamics, there are strong grounds to propose that architecture and urban design can be used to help create alternative peaceful and sustainable visions of the future when reconstructing a war-torn society.

Obviously, the outcome of such efforts at reconstruction matter in terms of enhancing or bridging social, political, and economic divisions in that buildings and infrastructures can facilitate or abridge social interaction. Yet, already the process of designing the future built environment can serve this purpose, as the profession of architecture is geared at transcending scales and seeking solutions that integrate well into prevailing structures. Moreover, given that the (re)building of a place is tied to taking (physical) control of it, and in light of the fact that reconstruction is most sustainable if it exhibits broad-based buy-in at the part of society, the joint planning of the built environment can be understood to be vital for successful reconstruction. Therefore, it is crucial not to leave the reconstruction of a war-torn space to urban planners and specialized experts, but to include both local policy- and law-makers and representatives of the general public (i.e. local communities/inhabitants).

War, generally, leads to a significant destruction of the built environment. As these built environments constitute places of belonging to which people attach meaning and identity, the demolition of real estate and related manmade physical structures goes hand in hand with the destruction of meaning and identity. Being deprived of fabricated structures to which people attach value, societies are turned into individualized ‘floaters’ in a geographical sense. Whilst the destruction of ‘meaningful’ places (i.e. places that provide meaning to people) is most vivid in the context of large-scale violence, similar processes of alienation can take shape by less violent means. According to Marwa Al-Sabouni, this is precisely what can be observed in the case of Syria. From colonial times until today, urban landscapes came to be increasingly functional and artificial, incrementally constricting space for keeping the rich and interrelated culture(s) of Syria alive. The segregating of neighbourhoods and destruction of public spaces, for example, led to alienation between the people and paved the way for Syria’s civil war.

REFLECTIONS & POTENTIAL FOR DEVELOPMENT

Although a certain connection between the built environment and a society’s socio-political trajectory cannot be denied, a few questions do arise. Amongst the first is probably whether the relationship between the two is one of simple correlation or causation. In how far is architecture a crucial variable for explaining socio-political outcomes, or in how far is it one of many symptoms of more fundamental policy choices made at the part of a given society? In case we are dealing with issues of causation, in which direction does causality actually flow? Does a ‘better’ built environment lead to ‘better’ societies, or do ‘better societies’ lead to ‘better’ built environments? And, related, what is the scale of influence by which one variable influences the other? While a deterministic relationship linking the built environment to socio-political outcomes is quickly invoked, one should be wary of stripping people off their ingenuity and creativity to work ‘around things’. As is true for many other parts of life, while good structures might well facilitate certain processes, bad structures do not necessarily jeopardize these. Individuals should not be treated as ‘homo architecticus’ that are objects to the structures that surround them.
While seeking answers to these and other questions, it is certainly true that architecture can provide important guidance to peace-building in that many characteristics of architects are likely to prove valuable for peace-builders, too. Architects are not only trained to think in the long-term and solution-oriented, but are also experts in seeking to find ways by which the new structures integrate well and amend the prevailing environment. Moreover, architects cannot take unilateral decisions, but need to consult a variety of actors, and keep a range of issue areas such as economic, social, and ecological aspects in mind. Finally, apart from designing functional solutions, architects are also well-versed in wrapping function in aesthetics – an important means of adding value and contributing to inner peace. All these hallmarks of architectural work can serve as important inspirations to peace-builders when going about reconstructing a war-torn society. Hence, a starting point for further exploring the architecture-and-peace nexus lies in identifying ways for beneficially including architects and architectural thinking into processes of post-conflict reconstruction. What are contemporary best practices, and how can they be used as inspiration for advancing this relationship to foster peace?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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FOLLOW UP

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