

Lejla Džumhur¹

Traumatic Heritage Places in Urban Context – Assessment and Interpretation of Values

ABSTRACT: Heritage studies have, up to this point, paid little attention to urban landscapes and entire cities that have been considered as Traumatic Heritage Places (THP). As a contribution to the issue of management of non-values in such areas, this paper examines commemorative practice in the aftermath of the 1992–1995 siege of Sarajevo.

Following three commemorative episodes, the analysis centers on the contribution of the urban sites' initial qualities to the construction of commemorative values. The key question is the mutual compatibility of the site's initial values and the added commemorative non-value: do they negate one another, or do they effectively coexist and build on each other?

The analysis illustrates how disregarding the initial qualities of a site leads to competing claims about its significance and diminishes its pragmatic use. Furthermore, the conclusions of the article point out the vital importance of dialogue among the stakeholders involved, particularly the participation of the concerned users – the citizens, throughout the decision-making process, from the comprehensive and inclusive assessment of non-values assigned to the city, to their accommodation and conveying in a manner sensitive to the city's vital and dynamic urban context.

Finally, the illustrated practice indicates a disregard for the prospects and potential brought about by a proper understanding and interpretation of the traumatic context – one that archives and commemorates, but also produces broader social changes critical for the process of reconciliation.

Keywords: Sarajevo; Commemoration; Traumatic Heritage Places; Values; Urban Environment

1 Introduction

Heritage sites do not necessarily have to convey only 'good' qualities; 'they can also represent undesirable views or actors' (Avrami and Mason 2019, 11). Termed as non-values, such qualities have emerged as a result of traumatic events, including modern wars. In the changing discourse of warfare

¹ Assistant Professor Dr Lejla Džumhur, University of Sarajevo, Faculty of Architecture (Patriotske lige 30, 71000 Sarajevo, Bosna and Hercegovina). Email: lejlas@af.unsa.ba; ORCID: 0000-0002-9687-4647.

in the 20th century, urban environments have increasingly been situated as a context for military operations, and the logic of total war finally made 'the home front a battlefield, where there are no innocent bystanders and where civilians are de facto implicated [...]' (Mendieta 2007, 29).

During the siege from 1992 to 1995, Sarajevo acted as an unconventional battlefield, subjected to military operations that led to enormous civilian casualties and uricide.

Notwithstanding the disparity in power dynamics between the perpetrator and the victim, the resistance of civilians and the rising Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina emerged coherently from the very beginning of the siege. Each group of besieged population was able to make its own distinctive contribution to the resistance, which was unavoidably tied to the city, its survival and defense.

In the specified context, the entire besieged city eventually acquired the qualities of a Traumatic Heritage Place (THP). As 'places that are related to violence, war conflicts, genocide, and various forms of discrimination forming collective negative experiences, they are participants in the contemporary social process of constructing cultural trauma' (Mason 2019, 162). Consequently, starting with the cessation of hostilities, Sarajevo continued to gain new commemorative sites of diverse manifestations of suffering and resistance, which intertwined into the urban network, transforming its character and redefining the site's significance.

To date, heritage studies have paid little attention to large urban areas and entire cities that have been considered as THP. There are rare occurrences and assessments and management of related non-value touches on sensitive and contentious political and social issues. As a contribution to the issue of commemoration in such urban landscapes, this paper examines the role of the sites' initial qualities in the construction of commemorative values and symbols of mourning and healing. The key question is the mutual compatibility of the site's initial values and the added commemorative non-value: do they negate one another, or do they effectively coexist and build upon each other?

Without seeking to draw comprehensive conclusions or viewpoints, the paper follows three commemorative episodes in Sarajevo, focusing on utilitarian and symbolic values and perceptions of the site before and after

the monument was erected. The main issue these episodes seek to address is to what extent the new monument altered the initial understanding of the urban place among local communities.

The examples employed in the analysis were chosen to demonstrate three levels of monument visibility in urban space: localized, linked to a confined urban area and its users; those that engage with the broader population of users and exhibits a greater degree of public visibility; and the broadest level, which encompasses the entire city.

Although it was not a decisive factor in the selection of illustrative cases, the diversity of their formal expression was intentional. In the cited examples, commemoration is represented through an abstract three-dimensional architectural expression, a realistic symbolic form, and a two-dimensional abstract monument.

The paper's conclusions demonstrate the vital importance of dialogue among involved stakeholders, particularly the participation of concerned users – the citizens – throughout the entire decision-making process, starting from the value assessment of potential memorial sites and the outlining of their future aesthetic attributes to the management of the sites after the erection of monuments. Furthermore, as the analysis illustrates, disregarding the site's initial qualities leads to competing claims about its significance and diminishes its pragmatic use.

The paper also points to the striking absence of awareness of the capability of Traumatic Heritage Sites to embody a distinct, contemporary, and less acknowledged perspective on social values and yield benefits that extend beyond the direct connection between heritage and the heritage community. Among many others, these heritage places can address broader issues of political conflict and reconciliation, social justice, and civil rights issues (Avrami and Mason 2019, 11).

2 First Commemorative Episode

The first episode represents the memorial created by closely mediating the initial utilitarian, social, and architectural-environmental values of the site in the memorial program.

After a lengthy search for an acceptable location for a memorial honoring the fallen members of the Special Police Unit 'Lasta', the Municipality of

Centar Sarajevo had designated a small area within the park adjacent to the Sarajevo Faculty of Civil Engineering, which served as the Unit's headquarters during the aggression. The choice was also influenced by the qualities of the site, which were integrated into the design conception.

The open area chosen for the commemoration sits below the iconic AG student club and, for many years, represented its expansion into nature, being a much-loved place for gathering and socializing of students – the site's primary category of users. Such potential was recognized and employed into the new conception: 'The monument should represent a symbol of peace, freedom, and multi-ethnicity, as well as a functional space for citizens where children, the elderly, and other citizens for whom they sacrificed themselves will spend their free time' (Odred policije 'Lasta' dobija spomenik u Sarajevu 2018).

The design of the memorial reflects the formal aspects of the initial site: its modest, circular space, facing the slope and surrounded by greenery, flanked by a stone elevation intended for seating (Figure 1).

Figure 1: A memorial honoring the fallen members of the Special Police Unit 'Lasta' during the deconstruction works of the initial structure. A circular stone sitting area is apparent in the background. Source: Official web site of Municipality of Center Sarajevo, <https://centar.ba/vijesti/16821/danas-zapoceli-pripremniradovi-na-izgradnji-spomen-obiljezja-lasta>.



This old structure was replaced by an identical form of the monument's pedestal in stone paving and similarly surrounded by a continuous stone elevation for seating. However, although the monument is formally identical to the previous structure, it differs in a number of important features. The new smooth, polished stone surfaces without obvious joints are difficult to identify with the original roughly hewn, irregular stone seats and green patchwork paving. Furthermore, two vertical slabs have been placed, facing the faculty building and the student club, with their middle points perforated in the shape of a swallow, the Unit's symbol. Significant in size, they nearly completely obscure the otherwise open view on the green slope, highlighting the names of the fallen members written on the inner panel surfaces (Figure 2).

Figure 2: A memorial honouring the fallen members of the Special Police Unit 'Lasta': top: memorial panel; bottom: sitting area. Source: Author, 2025.



The final performance contradicts the intention of social interaction; it does not encourage larger gatherings, sitting or playing, but rather presents the monolithic stone circle as a closed, self-sufficient whole. The 'cold' monumental appearance is inhospitable, and the use for its initial purposes is thwarted by the possibility of desecration, which is hinted at

by the most dominant architectural element – the slabs with the names of the fallen. Today, the space is an empty backdrop, devoid not only of students, but also of other users envisaged by the new concept. The social value of commemoration, which employs the well-established associative architectural tools to evoke suffering and trauma, has forced itself as the primary quality of the site.

3 Second Commemorative Episode

The second episode concerns the erection of a memorial in the park adjacent to the Second gymnasium, a location where many segments of public life converge. The park serves predominantly as the gymnasium's schoolyard, while also being used by residents of the neighboring large socialist settlement Ciglane, which has almost no green areas. Moreover, the park is intersected with pathways used daily by pedestrians along the Koševo residential area-city center route.

The initiative to erect a memorial to the Special Police Unit 'Bosna' is several years old. The winning entry in the 2016 competition is a realistic sculptural composition authored by a Sarajevo artist with a New York address – Nebojša Šarić Šoba, himself a former member of the BiH Army. His concept promotes a 'David and Goliath conflict', highlighting the disproportionate dynamics between a Unit's forces and a superior enemy. The monument depicts a historical event – the capture of an enemy tank belonging to the then Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) during the onset of the conflict in May 1992 in the Stup neighborhood of Sarajevo. The actual tank artifact is accompanied by five life-sized bronze figures of special forces in combat attire, who are rejoicing at the enemy's loss. The backdrop of the composition is a tall wall inscribed with the names of the eight fallen fighters (Stigao tenk kod Druge gimnazije u Sarajevu, predstavljat će spomenik specijalcima 2024) (Figure 3).

The decision to build the monument in this part of the city sparked a heated public debate, which ultimately led to the postponement of construction until 2024. The debate focused on the militarization of the culture of remembrance (Spomen-tenk usred Sarajeva: Militarizacija kulture sjećanja 2018) within the delicate context of public urban spaces, children's parks, and schoolyards. Maida Zagorac, coordinator of the non-gov-

ernmental organization Peace Building Network, asserts that the aesthetic representation of the monument results in the ‘retraumatization of the survivors’ (Zvijerac and Halimović 2023). The question ‘Whom does the tank target?’ arose after the real artifact was displayed.

Figure 3: A memorial to the Special Police Unit ‘Bosna’. Source: Author, 2024.



Key stakeholders, including the Second gymnasium administration, the council of parents, and the public, were excluded from the discussion on the site selection. The political structures altered during the eight-year negotiating period showed a polarized perspective regarding the suitability of the location. The commemorative aesthetic, which relies on the subjective imagination of the artist and the constrained reach of public competition, undermines the essentiality of public participation. Owing to his international recognition and his role as a member of the BiH Army, the artist acquired a sort of informal authority over interpretation of the traumatic past.

By drawing on his personal favorable recollections of the former Yugoslavia’s commemoration practices and the then present overarching militarization of history, Šerić explains the site’s ‘unproblematic’ nature and his aesthetic exploration of memory. Growing up in a close post-war (Second World War) reality in an intimate familial environment, ‘patriotic and ideologically orientated’, was colored at all levels by the approval of militant discourse, as well as by the artist’s own fascination with it. ‘I first got a plastic gun as a toy, and only then Micky. Cartoons were favored, yet priority was still given to “Sutjeska”, “Neretva”, “Otpisani”, “Valter brani Sa-

rajevo”, and shows like “Dozvolite da se obratimo” (the morning program of the Yugoslav People’s Army) [...] My mother was active in SUBNOR, so they often invited her to “Maršalka”, and she would take me there to look at cannons, rifles, tanks [...] I climbed all over it – as much as they allowed me – fascinated by the firepower of our glorious army, built on the blood of our fighters. When we returned home, I made, with my dad’s help, tanks out of plasticine. Every detail was important’ (Šerić 2024). As a supporting argument for his design, according to the portal ‘slobodnaevropa.org”, Šerić highlighted the fact of memorial tanks being ‘placed all over America and Europe, and that children also play on tanks and cannons from the Second World War placed near the National Museum in Sarajevo in front of the café “Tito”’ (Zvijerac and Halimović 2023).

However, in the aforementioned societies, conflict was not aimed at the internal stratification of the community. In the aftermath of the war, members of those communities were able to ‘define their solidarity relationships in ways that, in principle, allow them to share the suffering’ (Jeffrey 2012, 6). Conversely, the ultimate goal of conflict in cities such as Mostar and Sarajevo during the 1992–95 aggression, Beirut during the Lebanese Civil War, and East Jerusalem after the Israeli military occupation in 1967 was to replace heterogeneity with homogeneity (Coward 2009 in Chiodelli 2021). Communities in such post-conflict societies acquire internalized competing claims about the cultural trauma itself (Jeffrey 2012). Thus, the sharing of suffering is considerably more challenging, and militarisation occurs within a fragmented social context.

4 Third Commemorative Episode

The last chapter discusses the unconventional memorials known as ‘Sarajevo Roses’. Their creation is not a consequence of the official politics of memory in the post-war period, but a commemorative initiative started by the civilians themselves during the aggression, which was then reflected in the post-war artistic vision of the architect Nedžad Kurto.

The Sarajevo Roses emerged as a unique reminder of the locations where shells fired at the city and civilians from enemy positions during Sarajevo’s siege left their mark on the street pavements, which also resulted in the deaths of many citizens.

Local wartime journalists described the traces of exploded shells on the city's streets, filled with the dead's blood, as 'Bloody roses'. During the conflict, citizens started to mark these traces, leading Sarajevo architect and artist Nedžad Kurto to design 'non-monumental' and 'silent' memorials (Junuzović 2006). Consequently, after the cessation of hostilities, over 100 remains from the city's bloodiest shelling were permanently sealed in red resin.

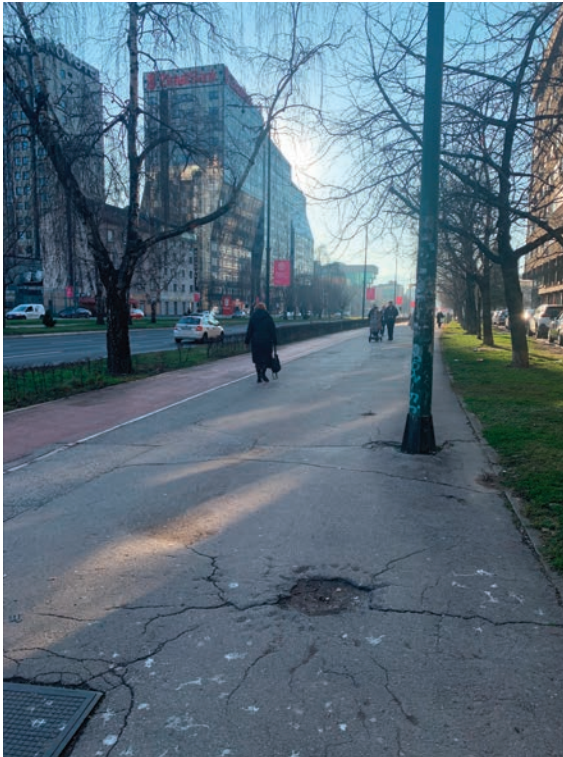
The Sarajevo Roses have become a fundamental aspect of urban identity. Embedded into the pathways that Sarajevans navigate through the streets today, they are a silent reminder of the terror of daily life in the besieged city. The non-monumentality, two-dimensional appearance, and abstract aesthetics of the Roses, as well as their material authenticity, provided tremendous commemorative power (Ristić 2013) (Figure 4).

Figure 4: One of the 32 officially protected and restored Roses, located in the front of the Sarajevo Cathedral. Source: Author, 2023.



In this case, the memorial does not violate the initial values of urbanity, but rather builds on them and bears witness to the authentic experience of suffering and its anonymity and comprehensiveness, but also the extraordinary event of urbicide – the death of the city. However, the failure of governmental institutions to recognize the importance of this landmark has resulted in their neglect, physical degradation, and loss of the monument's integrity. Following the commemoration, no institution, agency, or organization had a legal obligation to protect the Sarajevo Roses, and they began to disappear, forgotten and decaying, as well as being destroyed due to intensive urban renewal after the war (Figure 5)².

Figure 5: One of the many neglected Sarajevo Roses. Source: Author, 2023.



² The Sarajevo Roses were designated as a monument in 2022 by the procedure of previous protection at the level of Canton Sarajevo (Cantonal Institute for the Protection of Cultural-Historical and Natural Heritage). Still, no institution is accountable for their maintenance and restoration.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Veteran Affairs of Sarajevo Canton implemented a marking criterion that allows only traces of shells that killed three or more people to be preserved³, undermining the monument's integrity and authenticity. This reduction in the number of Roses from over 100 to around 30 protected remains overlooks their importance as a testimony to uricide and as symbols of cultural and moral resistance to destruction, which led to a new form of urbanity – the 'landscape of survival'.

Figure 6: Sarajevo Rose, marking the trace of the shell that caused the first Markale massacre, alongside the memorial plaque commemorating the same event. Source: Author, 2024.



3 This criterion was established within the sub-project 1.7 'Marking of places of major suffering in besieged Sarajevo'. In 2007, the Government of the Canton of Sarajevo charged the Ministry of Veterans' Affairs of the Canton of Sarajevo to implement through the Memorial Fund (Fund of the Canton of Sarajevo for the Protection and Maintenance of Cemeteries of Martyrs and Fallen Soldiers, Memorial Centers, and Memorials for the Victims of Genocide) the sub-project 'Marking of places of major suffering in besieged Sarajevo – places of shell explosions (Sarajevo Roses)' as part of the project 'Siege and Defense of Sarajevo 92–95' (Bosna and Herzegovina, Federation Bosna and Herzegovina, Sarajevo Canton, Canton Sarajevo Memorial Fund 2022). At the moment, only 32 Roses are protected by the designation of Cantonal Institute for the Protection of Cultural-Historical and Natural Heritage.

Ultimately, their non-monumental form contradicts the prevailing perception of an ‘appropriate’ monument, as exemplified by the competition between the traditional memorial plaque and the Sarajevo Rose, both of which commemorate the same event – the first massacre at the Markale open market (Ćusto 2013) (Figure 6). The aforementioned governmental activities have overlooked the fact that the value of the Sarajevo Roses lies not in their visual reference, but in their spatial arrangement and number, ubiquity and ability to unfold slowly and be noticed in the rhythm of urban life.

These actions once again left out public participation as the most important tool in the now reversed decision-making process related to restoration and conservation of the memorial, which in the first place, was brought alive by citizen participation.

5 Conclusion

Acting as a spatial backdrop for its citizens’ traumatic experience during the 1992–1995 siege, Sarajevo acquired qualities of a vast traumatic heritage place (Avrami and Mason 2019; Mason 2019). Until now, post-war commemoration has been an unsystematic, opaque, and protracted process spanning over thirty years, striving to accommodate the disvalues assigned by diverse categories impacted by the trauma. The bond between urbanity, its initial qualities, and the disvalues gained during the Siege has been continuously tested in an intricate process of turning the page, forgetting, and commemorating. Moreover, the curation of these qualities has mostly relied on traditional commemorative practices and the formal aesthetics and functions of ‘monuments’.

This study explored three episodes of commemoration within the urban context of Sarajevo, highlighting the connection between initial values and commemorative symbolic values.

The findings of the analysis primarily testify to the concerning lack of awareness about the need for commemorative practices to appear as an upgrade to the existing values of urbanity and, by so doing, enable the uninterrupted life of the city.

The first two cases illustrate the conventional practice of commemoration as an initiative executed through internalized site- and design-se-

lection procedures that bypass public participation. The construction of the memorial dedicated to the Special Police Unit Lasta' reveals how the utilization of formal principles of monumentality and conventional commemorative symbolism has overshadowed and degraded the initial spatial and social values assigned to the site by a smaller localized group of users.

The second case, concerning the monument to the Special Police Unit 'Bosnia', situated next to the Second Gymnasium, exhibits a wider and more comprehensive public visibility. The pronounced military aesthetic of the winning design has provoked negative reactions and public debates regarding the suitability of this urban location. In this case, through the constrained process of public competition, the artist puts forward his own vision and moral judgments about the appropriate commemorative aesthetic and its spatial and social environment. This artistically focused approach likewise fails the test of public opinion.

The change in experience and previous use of the urban places in question reflects the emerging tension between initial and commemorative values. These monuments dominate the urban landscape instead of co-existing with it; they do not add a new symbolic layer but rather negate everyday urban life, which seeks to nurture memory as part of the healing process rather than militarizing it within an already complex post-war social reality. Traumatic values are part of the history of Sarajevo's urban life, which needs to be spatially and utilitarianly integrated within its boundaries, rather than becoming its overall narrative.

The final example of the Sarajevo Roses demonstrates how the participation of citizens in shaping the memorial aesthetics and symbolism has led to an exceptional connection between the urban space and the monument, which, however, suffers from other types of sanctions. Misguided comprehension of the non-monumental anonymous aesthetics as 'less valuable' led to their disappearance and degradation. Such perceptions also promoted an improper approach to their official protection, which has resulted in a reduced number of protected Roses.

Sarajevo Roses, as a non-order monument, while omnipresent in urban space, do not construct but subtly urge remembrance. Integrated into the urban environment, they manage to intertwine the lives and

deaths of fellow citizens, both in war and in the current peace, consistently yet unobtrusively permitting individuals to decide when and how they will remember.

The analysed commemorative practice highlights the need to develop a community engagement program that tackles the decision-making process at all levels, from assessment of values that communities assign to a certain event or site, to the sustainable management of the traumatic site. The traditional perspective on monuments as mere representations of remembrance and mourning fails to hold in a context that testifies to the continuity of life.

Finally, the illustrated practice indicates a disregard for the prospects and potential that come with a correct understanding and interpretation of the traumatic context – one that archives and commemorates, but also produces broader social changes that are critical for the process of reconciliation.

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