

Original Paper

Rubble of War Take an Active Meaning in Urban Design

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Received: April 5, 2022

Accepted: April 29, 2022

Online Published: May 6, 2022

doi:10.22158/uspa.v5n2p1

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/uspa.v5n2p1>

Abstract

This article is a part of a research that is structured on the analysis of the definition of ruins and rubbles and then shows the real present state, through cartographic, historical, urban and territorial surveys of different stories of cities destroyed by acts of war (since the Second World War until the most recent conflicts with the war in Lebanon). The study was divided in parts relating to the material dimension of the destroyed city and the intrinsic spatial conformation, as results of acts of war such as: hills of rubble and modifying coastal lines as a result of piles of inert materials and also general waste. So the city gained a renewed post-war image, a different spatial identity and another orography that, now, asks to be revealed. Following the war, in effect, what remains is nothing more than a collection of urban materials often without any value that, in their physical state, occupy space and reveal other, unexpected urban and territorial pictures. However, rubble take a meaning in urban design, take an active role in geographical plane and show an alternative means to describe the overlapping and solidification of historical signs.

Keywords

Debris-Ruins-War-Reconstruction-Identity

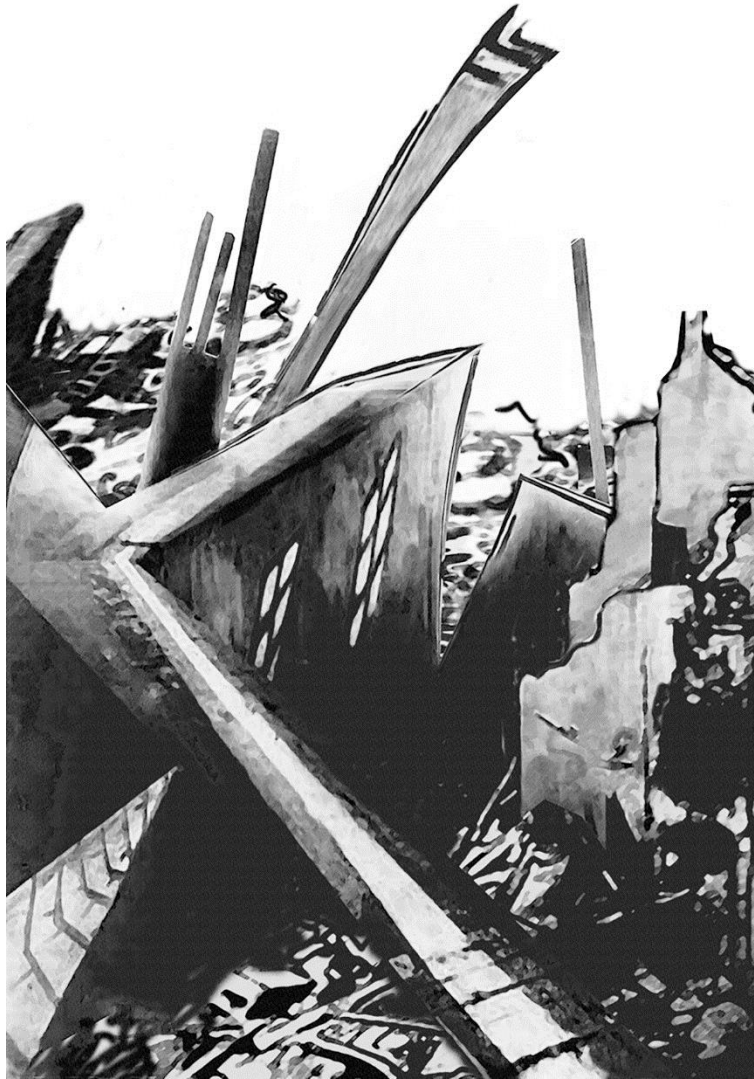


Figure 1_ *The destruction of the city in time of war*
(graphic composition Silvia Dalzero)

In this article we are going to evoke images of war, of destroyed and re-built cities, of identities lost and found, which will shape the new urban setting in its material dimension. All conflicts, more or less distant in time, more or less extended in space, always leave behind heaps of rubble, of debris of any kind and shape, a whole of urban materials often absolutely worthless, but able to occupy space and reveal a different and unexpected image of place. That's why starting from the rubble is a way to study the urban project, because it gets an active role in the geographic shaping and outlines a different way to consider the setting and overlapping of historical marks. Ruins and debris are not to be only considered as prerogatives of a physical or cultural context, which determines and leads the architectural and urban practice from outside, but above all as peculiarities inner to the project itself, belonging to the world of relationship between themselves and the landscape, natural or artificial, in which they have to act. It is also important to be able to distinguish between ruins and rubble, so starting a process of selection of the architectonic assets through which the material culture updates, or better tries to update, out of respect for some invariant elements which are the identity factors of continuity in the present. In this way the dimension implied by what is debris and what is ruins can acquire, according to various interpretative levels, a decisive role in the qualification-requalification of the space, connoting it both formally and historically. In this sense the ruins get into relation with the

soil not only lying over, in order to preserve the original morphology, but they become the interpreters of a place, the main actors in the memory of a time past and not yet passed. In the ruins an additive logic prevails, which takes any urban dimension into a condition of reciprocal detachment recalling a far off story. A story witnessed by a heap of ruins that enchant the viewer like a landscape of sculptures, a landscape where you feel free to get lost in a dreamlike dimension created by the image of a fragmented town. A landscape of ruins creates a magic atmosphere in which a malignant rule of unstable balance takes shape, between the show of the collapse and the need to tell the story witnessed, to document the facts of a time passed but not yet dispelled. As to the rubble instead, a subtractive logic prevails, which transforms the soil modifying its quality thanks to operations interfering with the inertia of the soil itself, to some extent recalling the original meaning of space suggested by Heidegger that is emblematic space. The ruins, then, become space in the soil and of this they become an integral part, a sort of mineralized landscape. From this point of view we could say that the town, even though composed of several realities, must come to terms with the substance it's made of, which appears, in its ultimate synthesis, destruction itself. The rubble, then, gets all the characteristics of a *heideggerian spatium* with variable thickness, through which man's action and material come into contact with one another giving shape to a renewed urban context, shown in the orographic change, with the appearance of debris-made-hills of variable height and more or less in-town, with marshland reclaimed and coastline advanced into the sea. After this, what appears is a sort of artificial landscape, a shapeless urban entity in continuity with the natural landscape. The promise of a future town that, between liberated and occupied space, gives form to the post-war urban identity. The destroyed city acknowledges the existence of material which, because of its nature, occupies space and needs a project able to make it the essential element of the context where it has to act. And this element becomes urban and territorial object, or better, soil as interpreter of different/several environmental relationships. Traces, leftovers, wreckage and rubble and not only ruins, when observed with critical eyes, have been gaining historical sense and value. Nowadays we live a time when both building and destructive techniques have changed/improved deeply so that the difference between rubble and ruins has been getting more and more other qualities. Architecture, as all wars, from Germany to Vietnam, from Hiroshima to Beirut, from Gaza to Jerusalem, from ex Yugoslavia to Iraq, has given shape to a new urban and territorial reality and also to a renewed social identity, suggesting even the subversion of the ancient poetic of ruins into poetic of rubble. Progress and dissolution have become unavoidable fate in any time and since the early XX century when technological and industrial progress clashed with the first World War, the new inventions have brought destruction and catastrophes until the ultimate tragedy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Tragic events they were, nothing but expression of the absurdity of the war and even more abnormal because they took place in the highest pitch of scientific and technological achievements, causing the destruction of whole cities in a few seconds with their silent explosions. The modern wars annihilate the shapes of both the human and urban body and a fragmented, formless, kaleidoscopic image of town is being outlined, which changes with the changing light, ephemeral and always looking for a further formal identification. In the early XIX century Walter Benjamin himself saw the destruction of a town as the essential element of its very foundation: "dreams, about the decline of Paris, demonstrate the incomprehension of technique. In them, is expressed the vague awareness that, together with the big cities, arise, also, the means to destroy them". (W. Benjamin in *I passages' di Parigi*). We could speak of *urbicide* any time we have to cope with a conflict or the siege of a town, like the destruction of Beirut, the numberless attacks in Jerusalem, the 9/11 attack in New York, the yearly war in the Gaza Strip etc. Even Paris could be numbered in the list of towns victims of *urbicide* in the descriptions of Walter Benjamin, Thòphile Gautier, Honor è de Balzac, Victor Hugo and Jean Baudrillard when, in *The disappearance of art*, he referred what Val àry had said after the first World War: "From now on the cities know they are mortal. After Auschwitz and Hiroshima we could say: Now the civilization knows it is dead". (J. Baudrillard in *La sparizione dell'arte*). Baudrillard's words have the taste of an apocalypse because nothing else remains to history nor to the world saturated by itself. With the passing of time it is the space that becomes the permanent element, a link between past and present, a conditioning factor of the present onto the future. Witnesses of the past the towns change, transform themselves, are the result of social and political balances, the expression of economy, subject to crises, metamorphoses and sometimes even doomed to collapse and death. The urban forms must then be interpreted in continuous metamorphosis, in a continuous molecular change which brings, inevitably, to the discovery and definition of different and a more or less stratified scenery. Such urban entities, more or less far away, such spaces suspended in a past time, such war scenes full of, or maybe enslaved by, a political, military, historical value, together with the

collective memory, need a careful evaluation to be able to get meaning or to reveal a new and indistinct one. In particular in this study we are going to tell of cities destroyed by the absurdity of war and inhabited by men beaten/crashed in body and spirit, whose idea of town, after years of conflict, has become a torn image of collapsed buildings, of open areas instead of squares, of heaps of rubble instead of palaces; waste and waste, not ruins inspiring romantic feelings but only pieces of material scattered everywhere. The rubble of towns which seemed to be the only possible outcome, the very essence of destruction, the relics of history. Furthermore immediately after the second world war, in Germany had been forming: *trummerberg and trummerhaufen*, which mean mountain and mound of rubble and such terms are still able to recall the urban setting after being bombed, the urban setting become just heaps of debris. What happened then of all the waste rising up to the sky and of the old towns lying in the shadow of such heaps of rubble? It is to such questions that our work tries to answer, starting from cartographic, historical, urban and territorial evidence in order to tell the story of destroyed cities and of their subsequent environmental, social and territorial transformations till their renewed image and identity. We will explain what happened of all the rubble heaped in destined areas during and above all after the war and how all this kept modifying the territory and its orography and also the previous urban structure which was to become completely different. As a consequence new places, forms and shapes were appearing during the reconstruction, sometimes reminders of the old cities and of the history of men, often just imitations of a destroyed past outlining a sort of fake urban dimension impossible to read and recognize. What could actually be seen was the sudden appearance of hills instead of flat land, or of solid ground instead of marshland or pools of water, in other words sudden orographic changes. So we could say that the hills of debris or a new coastline became the true witnesses of a historical tale, monuments to the devastation of war. But the new synthesis needed a re-composition based on principles and rules coming from the nature of the place which, in its geography and dimension, revealed the logic and role acquired in the definition of a renewed urban image. After every war attack the urban space was suspended and past and present and future mingled and were confused, time seemed to have moved backwards, the ruins appeared in an obsessive way, pervaded by homesickness/nostalgia and wish for redemption. In order to keep the city as a living organism, destruction and reconstruction became protagonists, essential elements always present and absolutely necessary to the constant settling process, to the metabolism of a city that lived, grew and modified itself incessantly.

At this point we can say that the city took a renewed post-war image, a different spatial identity and another orography. After the war, in effect, what remained was nothing more than a collection of often worthless urban materials which, in their physical state, occupied space and revealed other, unexpected urban and territorial images. so rubble played an active geographic role, and showed an alternative means of describing the overlapping and consolidation of historical signs.

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