

ARCHITECTURE AND THE SOCIAL FRAMEWORKS OF MEMORY

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Grateful as I am for the invitation to this important and timely conference, I shall limit my remarks to the relation of architecture to what the French sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs called “the social frameworks of memory” (*les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*). Halbwachs is not a widely known figure in architectural history and urban conservation studies.² Unlike his better-known contemporaries from the early twentieth century, the philosopher Martin Heidegger, and the literary critic Walter Benjamin—two thinkers on the opposite ends of the political spectrum, whose ideas inspired the hermeneutics of place, or of urban spaces of modernity such as the Parisian Arcades—Halbwachs had little interest in the ontology of architecture. Architectural and urban spaces figure prominently in Halbwachs’ work since he maintains that memories survive in the *longue durée* only to the extent they are indexed into architectural places, and mapped into an urban and historical topography.³ This comes with a caveat: in his pioneering study of “collective memory,” *La topographie légendaire des évangiles en terre sainte: étude de mémoire collective*, Halbwachs highlights the discrepancy between the archaeological record preserved in material culture—for example ancient ruins and monuments—and the living memory of a religious community.⁴ Likewise, in his study of working classes, Halbwachs’ neologism, “collective memory” is defined as a deliberately unstable category. Memories are socially constructed and are in a state of flux: their ability to accurately retain authentic lived experience is called into question.

The provisional and fluid definition that Halbwachs assigned to “collective memory” offers an insight into our present predicament. In the last decades, the ability of architecture, urban design, and architectural conservation in framing and preserving a stable and unified cultural heritage has been profoundly challenged. During the ethnic strife and ensuing civil wars of Bosnia Herzegovina and Kosovo in the 1990s, the battle was fought, in no small part, over cultural and architectural heritage. Communal violence targeted not only civilian populations, but also sought to erase all traces of the other’s architectural heritage: Kosovar mosques have been the targets of systematic destruction.⁵ A formerly multi-ethnic nation’s public memory was Balkanized into shattered and irreconcilable collective memories.

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² M. Christine Boyer’s *The City of Collective Memory* (MIT, 1996) is a significant exception.

³ Cf. Lewis A. Coser, “Introduction: Maurice Halbwachs 1877-1945, in Coser ed., Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (U. of Chicago, 1992).

⁴ Maurice Halbwachs, *La topographie légendaire des évangiles en terre sainte: étude de mémoire collective* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1941).

⁵ Andrew Herscher, Andrés Riedlmayer, “Monument and Crime: The Destruction of the Historic Architecture of Kosovo,” *Grey Room*, no. 1 (Autumn, 2000), 108-122.

The urban revolts that have arisen since 2010, which are optimistically called the Arab Spring, have further eroded citizens' trust in the ability of monumental architecture in representing a pluralistic and yet unifying memory in public spaces. This is in no small part due to the failings of the nation states and their architectural conservation apparatus, which, in lieu of allowing citizens to remember the past in pluralistic ways, abuse their prerogative by consolidating public memory into ideological "historical reconstructions." Just as social upheaval, oppression and resistance came to define more of the urban experience in the Middle East, new forms of commemoration such as performative reenactments of events in public spaces or new media have replaced architecture as anchors of collective memory. The other extreme is worse: when the nation state fails, as is the case in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, the vandalism of cultural heritage becomes a mass spectacle. The atrocities that are rerun on new media have replaced architecture's more prosaically managed and controlled memory. By *Balkanization of memory*, I refer to a current situation where different social groups not only remember events differently, but also prove shockingly oblivious to the suffering of the others. What are the architects, urban planners, urban designers, conservationists, and urban sociologists to do as "specific intellectuals" in the face of the current Balkanization of memory, and to uphold public interest? This essay makes the case for moving away from autonomous—or merely technical—inquiries that understand architecture and places as "sites of memory" to a new direction that builds upon Halbwachs' social frameworks of memory. It is thanks to Halbwach's pioneering, if incomplete, work on "collective memory" and social classes that we may understand how the emerging and open-ended social formations transform architecture as an art of memory.