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Sarajevo's Multi-layered Urban Fabric: A Spatial Reading of Memory and Identity

Belkis S. Top

Abstract

Sarajevo is a city shaped by different cultures, identities, and social or political developments ranging from the first settlers in BCE to the present. Later, in the Medieval and Middle Ages, the city hosted three major periods and rulers: the Ottoman Empire, Austria-Hungary, and Socialist Yugoslavia. Moreover, World War I, World War II, and the Bosnian War (1992-1996), which had intensely affected the civilians and the city, were experienced by the city. This fact opens a wide range of historical and cultural resources to preserve, reinterpret, and contribute to urban identity. The paper aims to investigate how Sarajevo and Sarajevo people generate urban identity by preserving remnants, traces, and memories, while also integrating them into everyday urban life. To achieve this, the city of Sarajevo was visited. Remnants in urban life were observed, analyzed, and photographed. Face-to-face conversations were held with some citizens. Accordingly, different remnants belonging to the Middle Ages, World War II, and the Bosnian War are selected from Sarajevo's urban fabric to be analyzed. The paper researches how the Sarajevo people tend to keep traces of the history that the city has witnessed. I argue that they preserve urban memory within the present urban life, which contributes to the formation of urban identity. It is a way of not forgetting the past, whether it is dark or not. This work attempts to contribute to the literature on how urban memory is valued and preserved within the city, integrating everyday urban life and becoming a city's characteristic feature and identity.

Keywords: urban memory, urban identity, trace, everyday urban life, Sarajevo

Introduction

Sarajevo, the capital city of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, is a multi-ethnic city with a rich history that embodies cultural and political diversity. The first settlers of the territory were Illyrians around 1-2 BCE, and Slavs arrived in the territory in the 6th century. Between the 15th and 18th centuries, Bosnia came under the control of the Ottoman Empire (Tülüce, 2014, pp. 116-118). After nationalist movements and rebellions, Bosnia became a state of the Austria-Hungarian Empire in 1908. The assassination of the Austrian-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand by Serbian Gavrilo Princip started World War I. As a result of rising nationalist movements in the multi-ethnic region, the empire collapsed with the First World War, and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was established.

Bosnia and Herzegovina had three major ethnic groups linked with three religions: Muslim Bosniaks, Orthodox Serbians, and Catholic Croats. During the Ottoman and the Austrian-Hungarian periods, the classification between groups was based on religious diversity. However, with the help of nationalist ideas during the Austria-Hungarian era, the groups started to be defined by ethnic identities. In this way, Bosnian Muslims, who are Bosniaks, Bosnian Serbs, and Bosnian Croats, became the three dominant ethnic groups in Bosnia (Malcolm, 1994, pp. 150-155). The Kingdom of Yugoslavia fell, and the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was established during World War II by Tito against Nazi occupation. In this way, Bosnia and Herzegovina became one of its federal republics (Malcolm, 1994, pp. 161-162). By the death of Tito and the fall of Yugoslavia, Croat and Muslim citizens of Bosnia aimed to establish an independent Bosnia and Herzegovina where each ethnic group could coexist peacefully, as they had historically. On the other hand, Donia indicates in his report "Republika Srpska Assembly, 1992-1995: Highlights and Excerpts" that Serbs aimed to be separated from other ethnicities and to divide Bosnia and Sarajevo accordingly (Becirević, 2014, p. 66). Because of these conflicting aims, the Bosnian War broke out, and the Bosnian Serb Army (BSA) laid siege to Sarajevo on 5 April 1992. BSA benefited from the topographical feature of Sarajevo, which was settled in a valley, around the River Miljacka, and it is surrounded by hills and mountains; the city was targeted by these hills. Ristić (2018, p. 59) indicates "Sarajevo was transformed into a form of 'panopticon' in which spatial practices of movement and encounter were controlled through the omnipresence of the snipers". Two types of assaults were employed by the army, which are sniper attacks and shelling. These assaults were targeting civilians and their everyday practices. The simplest movements in urban spaces, such as walking or crossing a street, were targeted by sniper fire. Thousands of people

were killed due to sniper bullets while walking in the streets (Ristić, 2018, p. 52). Due to fear of sniper fire, people were not walking in a straight line, but they were drawing zig zags and running to avoid bullets (Coşkun Aral Anlıtıyor, 2018). Furthermore, shelling with heavy arms was targeting the everyday urban life of groups of people. Public spaces such as market areas, squares, bread lines, and parks, were shelled. The army aimed to obstruct the co-living of different ethnic groups together and their access to basic needs (Ristić, 2018). The assault targeted not only people on the streets but also residential, cultural heritage, or symbolic buildings of Sarajevo. The National Library building, which remains from the Austria-Hungarian period, the parliament and the governmental complex, and the Oslobodenje newspaper building were destroyed. Additionally, residential buildings were in danger. Some parts of the buildings were destroyed by shells, while almost every facade of the buildings was damaged by bullets. The use of spaces in houses was transformed because of the danger. The safest spaces were middle zones of flats, staircase cores, and basements (Ristić, 2018).

In such conditions, the Siege of Sarajevo lasted for 1425 days between April 5, 1992, and February 29, 1996. Morrison & Lowe (2021, pp. 1-3) say it was the longest siege in European history, with unstoppable shelling and attacks. At the end of the siege, the death toll was estimated by ICTY (International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia) as 10,603 (Tabeau et al., 2003, p. 2) while it was also counted as 11,541 (Morrison & Lowe, 2021, pp. 1-3). Additionally, the number of people wounded was more than three times the death toll, as Donia (2006, p. 334) mentions. The horrible violence against people lasted for 1425 days, with thousands of victims who should be discussed and not forgotten. Not forgetting the violence is essential due to conveying the memory to future generations, commemorating the loss, and preventing possible future ones. Sarajevo and the Sarajevo people are conscious about preserving their hard memories because of the mentioned reasons. The violence left physical traces in the city and cityscapes inevitably. Those traces are preserved and integrated into everyday urban life today, which this study examines. The Siege of Sarajevo and its memory can be considered as a layer in the history of Sarajevo. However, the city cannot be considered with the layer alone. As mentioned above, cultural and political diversity creates a rich history. Which means, the city of Sarajevo has multiple layers belonging to multiple periods. In this respect, it is aimed to discover how Sarajevo's multi-layered features are conducted, how memories of different periods and events are kept, preserved in the city, and integrated into life. Both pre-war period memories and war memories are studied to grasp the relation between urban identity and multi-layered features.

Literature Review

For discussing ways to preserve urban memory, memory itself is studied. Both individual and social memory are examined in relation to objects and past experiences. In this concept, Bergson dealt with the perception of matter with the terms “image” and “matter”. Each “matter”, which is an object that exists in the world, is perceived by people differently. Perception is related to people’s consciousness, and each real object “matter” is perceived diversely as “image”. Differences in perception that turn matters into images are shaped by people’s own memory and past experiences (Bergson, 1962, pp. xi-xxi). In other words, one object means different things to each person who observes due to each person’s memories and old experiences.

The memory and experience relation is not only valid for individuals but also on a social scale. Societies perceive things under the influence of their past experiences. When a group of people has common past experiences, this perception becomes the social group’s own way of remembering the past. Halbwachs (1992, p. 49) indicates “...[W]e do not forget that even at the moment of reproducing the past our imagination remains under the influence of the present social milieu”. When the notion is adapted to the multi-ethnic context of Sarajevo, the events that the Sarajevo society experienced are open to being perceived differently by each ethnic group. The environment or the objects were perceived by the group’s own experiences. Shortly, an individual’s remembering is influenced by their past experiences. Similarly, social groups remember under the influence of the social context they belong to and the collective experiences. Additionally, interaction with the physical environment and physical objects enhances the memories being kept in mind. Connerton (2009, p. 37) mentions as such: “We conserve our recollections by referring them to the material milieu that surrounds us”. By considering these, it is possible to claim that members of a social group may live with memories without forgetting with the help of their physical environment. The physical environment of a social group can be considered as the city itself, and what they encounter in urban life. That is because preserving urban memory or preserving different layers of the city can contribute to preserving the memory of society. The importance of preserving the layers and how to handle it is examined by the architect Lebbeus Woods. Woods visited Sarajevo during the siege in 1993. According to his visit, he published the book “War and Architecture” in which he discussed how to deal with post-war cities and preserve the war memory (Pilav, 2020, pp. 707-712). Woods mentions old cities as they are “woven over centuries and generations” (Woods,

1993, p. 8). Complex layers of masses and voids in cities are created over different periods of time. They come together and create layers of a historic city. In this respect, Sarajevo, which hosted several rulers and empires, is a multi-layered city. Each era, such as the Ottoman period, the Austria-Hungarian period, the Yugoslavian period, or each event, such as the Siege of Sarajevo, World War II, Olympics held in Sarajevo, creates a layer of the city. When the layers overlapped on the city of Sarajevo, a historically rich, multi-layered city occurs. In this respect, “the attempt to restore the fabric of old cities to their former condition is a folly that not only denies present conditions, but impedes the emergence of an urban fabric and way of life based upon them” (Woods, 1993, p. 10). Reconstructing a layer of the city is cremergediticized by Woods since it means erasing a period of reality. Woods (1993, p. 14) also claims that accepting suffering or a loss becomes something gained by the city as a new experience and a new memory for the city. In other words, the destruction and the loss that is created by war is gained to the city when they are accepted. The Siege of Sarajevo, which affected thousands of people for almost four years, has a crucial role in both urban memory and social memory in this manner. What should not be done is not to erase the traces left from the conflict, but accept and gain from them according to the discussions of Woods. For sure, it is not limited to preserving the memory of the Bosnian War and the Siege but also some other events or periods’ memory which take an important place in the history of the city.

In this regard, traces of Sarajevo’s history, past events, and the Siege of Sarajevo are aimed to be observed and analyzed in the location. In this way, the influence of urban memory on urban identity is studied based on the theoretical background of memory, object, and experience relation, in addition to Woods’ notions on urban memory.

Methodology

Under the influence of the mentioned theories above about memory and preserving war traces, I visited Sarajevo to observe and discover ways of keeping urban memory in Sarajevo’s multi-layered urban fabric. Traces and remnants from the past were chased in the city. The relation between traces and citizens in their everyday urban life was observed in the location. Several photographs were taken to show the urban memory in people’s everyday life, which creates the urban identity of Sarajevo. Additionally, I made face to face conversations with the

Head of the Memorial Center of Sarajevo Kanton, Dr. Ahmet Kulanić, Assistant. Prof. Dr. Nerma Omićević, Senada C., and Ulvi T. Their daily experiences with war remnants, their thoughts about preserving war traces were discussed with them by the author.

Results

Traces of Older Periods

The city of Sarajevo was expanded throughout history in a linear way. Each new period built the city in its own way of construction without touching the older parts of the city. The eastern part of the city was built during the period of the Ottoman Empire. Later, the Austria-Hungarian rulers expanded the city westward to the old Ottoman part. Similarly, during the Yugoslavian period, the old cities were preserved, and a new socialist city was built in addition to them. Each period's architecture, urban spaces, or street organizations are kept, and today each layer of history can be observed and experienced in the city sequentially. Additionally, to these three main periods of Sarajevo history, some other traces, such as excavated traces belonging to older periods, are preserved by the Sarajevo people. Tombstones from the Middle Ages, which are called Stećaks, were excavated from Donja Zgošća (Bajić & Dimitrijević, 2020). They were brought and exhibited in the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo. However, a replica of one of the tombstones is on the side of Boulevard Zmaja od Bosne and exhibited in the daily life of Sarajevo. According to observation of the site visit, I can infer that a historic remnant from an old period is preserved and integrated into daily life; both cars driving along the boulevard and pedestrians walking along the side of the boulevard witness the trace of history. Very close to the tombstone, a memorial is located that commemorates two students who were killed in a traffic accident while they were crossing the street in 2016. At the location where the event occurred, in front of the Faculty of Philosophy, the memorial is erected. The memory of the event at that location is preserved. For the ones who witnessed the event, or who knew the event, the location and the object remind the event, and the memory is kept. During the site trip, one more memorial is observed near the memorial mentioned above. It was a marble cube which is located on the grass, and it commemorates fifty-five victims who were killed during the Second World War period by guerrillas. Each of the victims' names was inscribed on the faces of the cube. On the same walkway, near the

boulevard Zmaja od Bosne, a Sarajevo Rose and a symbolic tombstone for one of the victims of the siege are located, which will be mentioned in the next section as traces of the siege.

Figure 1

Stećaks exhibited near the Boulevard Zmaja od Bosne (Photograph taken by the author, 2025).

Figure 2

Memorials or traces located near the pedestrian of the Boulevard Zmaja od Bosne (Photograph is taken by the author, 2025).



Remnant tanks, trucks, and helicopter pieces are some of the other remnants from World War II, and are preserved in everyday urban life. The real objects remaining from the war are exhibited in an open public space. On a location where citizens face them during their daily routine, near the Cafe Tito, it is possible to observe and touch the real traces of history.

Figure 3

War vehicles from World War II exhibited in an open space (Photograph taken by the author, 2025).



Additionally, making graffiti and leaving traces on urban surfaces is a common behavior that can be observed in the city of Sarajevo. Political tendencies, supported figures, and political or sociological events are painted in the streets, facades, or grounds. One example is the 1984 Olympics held in Sarajevo. Another example is a written text again, which inscribes “I stand with Palestine” on the ground. In this way, the events of the Olympics and humanity’s opposition to crime are traced to everyday urban life. During my visit to Sarajevo, I infer from these examples that the city is used like an exhibition space. The whole city includes several objects, textures, and traces exhibited in the city on different scales. It enables the memory of Sarajevo to be preserved and integrated into life. In addition to these, the siege, which is experienced harshly by citizens while the violence left traces on the city’s surfaces, is an important part of the city’s history. The period of the siege is considered one of the layers of the city of Sarajevo. In the following parts, the preserved memory of the siege is discussed.

Figure 4 – Figure 5

Examples from graffiti and murals in the city (Photographs taken by the author, 2025).



Traces of the Siege of Sarajevo

Traces on Facades

Due to the geographic features of Sarajevo, the city was threatened by sniper fire and shelling from the tops of the hills and mountains. For four years unstoppable attacks; buildings were damaged by fire a lot. Based on my one-to-one conversation with the Head of the Memorial Center of Sarajevo Canton, Ahmet Kulanić, it can be said that almost every building that exists in the city was damaged by sniper fire. Additionally, they could not be repaired due to financial and psychological problems in the post-war era. Although many of them were repaired during the thirty years, many of the facades with bullet holes are observable in the city.

Figure 6

Bullet holes remained from the siege (Photograph is taken by the author, 2025).



I argue it in accordance with the theoretical framework that each hole opened by a bullet targeted human life, today exists in the urban fabric thirty years later, which enables the memory of harsh reality to be preserved and integrated into the urban fabric. Citizens of Sarajevo pass through the buildings, witnessing those bullet holes each day. They live in buildings that have scars on the facade. Although the people living in the building, people passing, and experiencing the streets have changed, the scars left from the war exist as a trace and as a reminder.

Sarajevo Roses

The shells targeted public spaces, and the co-living of the society caused the deaths of massive numbers of people. The traces left from the shells were filling by bloods of the victims. According to the suggestion of the professor at the University of Sarajevo, Nedžad Kurto, the scars on the ground were filled with red resin after the war, and they are called “Sarajevo Roses” (Ristić, 2018, pp. 178-179). In this way, the reality that many people were killed in inhumane conditions while they were conducting their everyday needs is not allowed to be forgotten. Although the people who lost their lives do not exist anymore, the Sarajevo Roses exist in the urban fabric as a reminder.

Figure 7

Sarajevo Rose in daily life (Photograph is taken by the author, 2025).



Many Sarajevo Roses were created in the post-war era. However, many of them were erased from the ground surface, or they were erased during the ground renovation projects. On the other hand, still several Roses exist. The repetition of the Roses scattered all around the city creates an urban texture. In this respect, it is claimed by the author that the Roses create a layer from the siege period, contributing to the multi-layered historic city. Today, it is possible to witness a Rose in random places in the city. On a pedestrian road, on a street, on a square, or on a market space. They exist silently on the ground surface while everyday life in urban spaces is ongoing. Whether they are noticed while walking or not, they are preserving the urban memory and the victims' memory by themselves as traces.

Figure 8

Sarajevo Rose in Markale (Photograph taken by the author, 2025).



One of the Roses exists in the open market space of Sarajevo, which is called Markale. The market space and the people providing their basic needs were targeted by a shelling attack on the 5th of February 1994. Due to the attack, 67 people were killed on that day. Markale is still used actively as a market space today. The scar of the shell that fell almost 32 years ago still exists on the ground as a Sarajevo Rose. While urban life is ongoing, people are shopping, having conversations, encountering in the space, the memory is preserving its existence in a very integrated way in everyday life.

The Symbolic Tombstone of a Child Victim

On Zmaja of Bosne Boulevard, which was the most dangerous zone targeted by snipers during the siege, it was called “Sniper Alley”. On November 18, 1994, a seven-year-old child, Nermin Divović, was killed on the boulevard, across the Holiday Inn Hotel. Since it was quite a dangerous zone, UN officers and conflict photographers were close to the location. With the voice of a shot, they run to the location where he was killed. Nermin was lying on the street with a pool of blood. The moment was photographed by Enric Martí. The photograph was published, and the tragic event was conveyed to the world through the media (Sniper Alley Photo, 2023). In 2015, a symbolic tombstone was erected at the location where he was killed. The name of the child, with the date he was born and killed were inscribed on the stone. Although thousands were killed in the boulevard, Sniper Alley, Nermin was commemorated at the exact location as a trace with a symbolic stone.

Figure 9

Symbolic tombstone located on where Nermin Divović was killed on the Boulevard.



It is possible to see the memorial while walking on the pedestrian strip just near the Boulevard Zmaja od Bosne. Since it is an active path, citizens use the Boulevard while they are going to work or school on their everyday route. The existence of shopping malls around also increases the number of people using the road and witnessing the memorial. Although it is hard to see the symbolic tombstone from the car at high speed, it can still be seen by passengers. The existence of it on the boulevard among such an active urban life makes the memory of Nermin Divović, all other victims, and the location is preserved.

Discussion

Based on my observations during the site trip, I claim that the Sarajevo people have a tendency to keep memories in urban life. They somehow leave a trace, whether it has a bad memory or not. In addition, they integrate the traces into everyday life, enabling the memories not to disappear or be forgotten. Each preserved remnant from some period of Sarajevo history means accepting and preserving different layers of the city together. Tombstones remained from the Medieval Age, and the graffiti remembers the Olympics held in Sarajevo in 1984, which were examples of good memories exhibited in urban life. They work with the theory of memory and object relations. They stand in the urban fabric as objects and keep the heritage of the city. Monuments located at the location where the event occurred preserve the memory in relation to their location. The aim is not only to commemorate the loss but also to sign the location with the event and integrate it into daily life. The location where Nermin was killed on Boulevard Zmaja od Bosne is marked with a memorial. A seven-year-old victim is commemorated at the same time; attention is drawn to how a public street becomes a grave for a child. Ulvi T., who is not Bosnian and has been living in Sarajevo for two years, shared his memories with me about what he felt and thought when he saw the memorial. He says he was affected emotionally by witnessing the trace of a reality that a child was killed in the middle of a street. Besides, he highlights that the year when Nermin was born affected him a lot because it is the same year as his year of birth. That means, if the child had not been killed that day, he would be the same age as Ulvi T. today. It is a relevant example of both object memory and experience memory relation. Ulvi T. is influenced by the memorial based on his own life and experiences. Every single observer will feel and remember differently, while the memorial commemorates the same event. Additionally, the society that witnessed the siege together will be affected and not forget it. Both the Sarajevo Roses and bullet holes are silent memorials keeping the

social memory and urban memory, and not communicating with people via words. They do not describe, or they do not represent anything. They are exact traces the war left so that only they can convey the harsh reality of the war to today. Accepting the reality of the war and not erasing it results in gaining the memory and contributing to the urban fabric as a layer of the siege. Additionally, these traces are integrated into urban life successfully, so that sometimes they become invisible, as Musil (1995, p. 64) indicates. Thousands of people are walking in the streets, witnessing Sarajevo Roses and bullet holes on facades. Experiencing this each day repetitively makes the traces invisible to the citizens at some point. It means for me that the integration with urban life and urban fabric is so successful that they remain harmonious. Even if they are not recognized by every human each time they pass through, they stay in urban texture as a silent reminder of the war. They keep the war memory as a layer on the urban fabric.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Sarajevo hosted different rulers and empires throughout history. It also experienced many different events, whether they are good or bad, such as wars and sieges. It reasoned that Sarajevo has many layers to preserve. In this respect, a site trip is conducted, and the aim is to discover how the memories are kept in the multi-layered Sarajevo. As a result of observations in the field, it has been figured out that Sarajevo keeps the memories in everyday urban life. It is possible to witness many different memories experienced in the past while walking in the city. Locations of some specific events in urban spaces were signed in various ways. In this way, the memory of location is still a part of the urban space even after years have passed. Seeing an information plaque on where the first victim was killed, and the siege started, where the Austria-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated, or where a shell fell, and numbers of people were killed, is possible while walking in the streets. Similarly, several types of memorials are available to be observed while walking around, where two students were killed in a traffic accident while they were going to school, or where a child was killed horrifically. Keeping the memory of the exact location is not the only method Sarajevo and the Sarajevo people adopt. Some memories that do not relate to any specific location are also preserved and integrated into urban life. War remnants, which are vehicles and memorials for World War II victims, are some of them. Additionally, graffiti and murals that express an idea of citizens or record an event or a memory on urban surfaces are also examples of that. People pass around them, witness them in

many diverse urban spaces in the city. If observers raise their heads while moving through the city, they will also realize some other memories recorded in the city, which are bullet holes on facades. The real scars targeted human life ones that remained from the siege period still exist all around the city, although many of the facades have been renovated already. In different buildings, belonging to different periods of history or serving with different functions, it is possible to observe the scars. Moreover, the density of scars and the level of damage on a single facade even communicate with the observer about the severity of attacks on the location in real-time during the siege. Oppositely, if experiencers move through by looking down, they will notice some other memories and traces as well which are Sarajevo Roses. The Roses exist in diverse locations that can be found while walking in the overall city. While walking randomly, a rose appears surprisingly and takes the observer's attention. Then, around some Roses, informative plaques about the day and the victims can be looked at. Again, the exact location where the shell fell and people were killed, is preserved. Also, it gives information about which kinds of spaces were targeted by the army.

For a visitor, it is possible to witness a new memory of the city in each step. For citizens, the memories are not recognized each time since they become part of their normal life. Generally, they do not look at them specifically because they pass between them millions of times in years. Which is not a problem, even a precious thing for the condition of Sarajevo, that the urban memory is integrated with urban life clearly. They create a complete working system together. This is a unique experience for Sarajevo, which creates its urban identity, which I claim.

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