BOMBED CARS: DUBROVNIK PLAYGROUND ARCHITECTURE

Bonjour, Dubrovnik

In Which Our Architecture Critic Notes the Effects of Bombs on Mortar and Mortals

BY EDWARD BALL

On October 1, 1991, at 8 a.m., the Serbian-led Yugoslav army opened fire on the Croatian city of Dubrovnik with tanks, mortars, and grenade launchers poised on the hills near town. Three weeks later, cannon from gunships parked in the Adriatic Sea began hitting the historic core of the 1000-year-old city, whose stone walls glow the color of parchment in the morning. The Serbs shelled periodically until December, took a few months off, then fired again through May and June.

It was like bombing Venice.

Kate Bagoje, an art historian, flares when she talks about what happened to her hometown. Like many Croats, she reviles her former co-nationals in Yugoslavia, the Serbs, and regards them as a different species. "They are primitives. In addition to their lying, their stealing, their killing, they are stupid. I'm speaking as though I'm standing at the altar. Dubrovnik was a republic and a center of civilization when they were still swinging from the trees."

A walled city during the Middle Ages, a rival of Venice throughout the Renaissance, Dubrovnik was a Kodachrome-perfect corner of old Europe that became a congested tourist destination after World War II. Now, as though catapulted backward in history, the city is once again a military redoubt. Croatian soldiers roam the area. Refugees spill out of what were once first-class hotels, laundry hanging through blasted windows. Checkpoints channel traffic along the winding coast road. A single hotel remains open to guests, many of them armed.

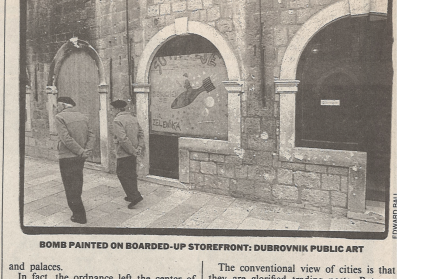
Serbian gun barrels stayed a mile south of the city until late October. A siege lasted for a year, during which electricity, food, and water were cut off for weeks at a time. Following a United Nations agreement, the Serbs pulled north into Bosnia and a few miles further south along the Dalmatian coast into Montenegro, still within firing distance. All's been calm since, the wind blowing through holes in the roofs and over

ously blasted stone. "It's unbearable, and I get very sentimental about it. Nobody touched this place for centuries, not the Turks, not the Venetians."

Beneath the facades scarred by shrapnel, a deeper, conceptual change has come over the city: the recrudescence of military space. What are the characteristics of wartime space? When martial order is superimposed on civil life, it creates a palimpsest. Everyday life continues behind the scrim of occupation—vegetable markets still open at dawn, church bells ring at vespers. But new maps take shape, delineating borders, front lines, safety zones. Architecture may be damaged, but the built world is further remade as a garrison in the mind. You can't take a bus to the next town without remembering to bring your papers: you'll have to surrender them at the roadblock. This hybrid state, incorporating both civil and warlike properties, is the meaning of the phrase, "a bastion of civilization."

Before the war, Dubrovnik was dreamwork in mortar. The old city, planted on a rocky peninsula that juts into the Adriatic, is ringed with walls, some dating to the 13th century. Within them, everything has been chiseled from beige limestone, the only construction material since a building code mandated it in 1272. A ban on cars means that foot and cart traffic clops along stone pavements smoothed by use, down alleyways that open into roomlike squares, then into streets as narrow as corridors. A newer town—if the 18th and 19th centuries constitute recent memory—surrounds the old fortifications. But the monuments and medieval urbanism of the center carry the identity of the city.

Until last year, the 60,000 residents of the Dubrovnik area lived off their embalmed history. Tourists sustained 90 per cent of the economy. Half a million came in 1990, spending $2 billion. When the city was part of Yugoslavia, that sum composed one-tenth of the national economy. Now the chief foreign exchange comes from the



EDWARD BELL

BOMB PAINTED ON BOARDED-UP STOREFRONT: DUBROVNIK PUBLIC ART

and palaces.

In fact, the ordnance left the center of Dubrovnik largely intact. About 150 people died during the bombing, and while the damage is serious, the city's limestone walls proved tough. Many buildings are battered, and eight palaces were burned, but the city was not subject to ruin, like Vukovar; or violation, like the Muslim women raped in Serbian camps; or virtual obliteration, like Sarajevo.

Kate Bagoje has her own documentation, gathered between explosions. "During the bombs, I walked the ramparts three times to photograph the damage. The enemy was above me on the hills. I could see them. They could have shot me at any time—and I just didn't care."

On her walks, Bagoje aimed the camera at the Franciscan monastery, built in the 14th century, which took 51 mortars and grenades. She went to *Velika Onofrijeva česma*, a domed fountain that brought fresh water in the 15th century. Its crown had been pierced, as though uncorked, by a direct hit. She inspected the smashed facade of St. Blaise's, the Baroque church of the city's patron saint. (St. Blaise's and other buildings would later be shrouded with protective walls made of wood. The planks look like architectural prosthetics.) There wasn't enough film for the holes in three-quarters of the roofs around town, or the missile craters like concave *fleurs du mal*.

Military jargon calls what happened here "shelling," a faint word that brings to mind the opening of an oyster. I propose that something else happened: abjection. The abject experience undermines human conceits. The architectural expression of abjection is the dismembered building.

There are two kinds of broken stone: ruins and rubble. Rome and other ancient capitals care for their prolific ruins like a family tomb. Ruins signify grandeur and inspire lyric poetry. They make good postcards and logos on restaurant menus. By contrast, rubble signifies . . . nothing. It is the white hole into which history disappears. To gaze on a pile of rubble is to call angst into the nervous system. Rubble is abject. The only thing to do with it is to banish it, suppress its memory.

The rubble will be carted out of Dubrovnik and dumped. It will not be monumentalized; it will not appear in guidebooks. But abjection will linger, and not merely because repairing the damage will take years. It will hold on because Dubrovnik has exchanged one type of space, the tourist mecca and mummified museum-city, for another, the garrison. The city has reassumed its original persona, shaped 1000 years ago, when it was a fortress: the consequence of war and preparing for it.

Dubrovnik today is a line of defense, this time against an expansionist Belgrade. Matko Medo, a former minister of parliament and Croatian arch-nationalist, observes that "St. Sava is the first saint of the Serbian Orthodox Church. According to

The conventional view of cities is that they are glorified trading posts. But any settlement is a stronghold first, a marketplace later. The stone bulwarks around Dubrovnik survive as some of the best-preserved fortifications in Europe. For centuries, the Republic of Ragusa, as the city-state was known, crouched behind its walls, ever in fear of attack.

Ragusa was already an old citadel when its seafaring merchants realized that spices and silk bought from their enemies to the east, the Turks, could be sold to their enemies to the north, the Austrians. With its new wealth, the city became a giant vault, monuments and artwork accumulating ever higher under the battlements. The walls formed an architectural strongbox. Ultimately, the city began to bribe menacing armies not to attack. Gold profits made the ramparts obsolete. Military space ceded to civil space.

In the old days, stone defenses created the stage on which the theater of war was to be played out: the fortified city required the siege. When the Serbs encircled Dubrovnik, architecture once again guided the hand of events. The Yugoslav army held back from a full ground assault; it chose instead the antiquarian war of the siege and the contemporary equivalent of the catapult, artillery. Deprived of food and water, the city's militarized space became abject space.

The scene at the Hotel Argentina is like something from central Europe, 1943. Bullet holes riddle the windows. A sign on the lobby door reads, "No guns, please." In the marble and mahogany bar, soldiers hoist beer and swap war stories. A 10-man choral group, in town for a concert, occupies a big table. It breaks into nationalistic songs, and the soldiers join in. Tuxedoed waiters offer drinks in a shifting palette of languages. Despondent local businessmen ("my office was bombed") nurse glasses of woe. A handful of women loiter about, deflecting the attentions of the troops.

I meet a man called Drasan, who has been drinking and prowling the streets. When I sit him down and buy him a glass, he disgorges his story.

Drasan had been traveling in the merchant marine for two years when the war started: "I came home because I wanted to be some kind of hero in the army." He shakes his head. "It didn't work."

He shrugs off an explanation, gulps liquor, then slurs on. He had managed to escape the military imperative, either by desertion or incompetence. A failed soldier, Drasan was the only Croat I would meet who expressed any empathy for the Serbs.

"Inside Serbia, it's interesting. I like their music. And person to person, they are like I am, or like you. But once you get them outside their borders . . . I just don't understand." He wants me to drink with him, and I decline. Leaning forward, he blears, "It's because you never been a war."

In an occupied zone, old spatial hierarchies no longer make sense, and new ones

ment past the sandbagged bunker west of town acknowledges the martial order. You accept the perquisites of the army, and internalize its code; it seems senseless to go beyond a certain geographical radius without consulting the regional command. Public space, in other words, is no longer public. The labels on other things change as well. Bosnia ceases to be a place; it becomes, above all, the battlefield. And people experience corresponding shifts in the structure of personal identity.

Slobo Milošević, a taxi driver, is at pains to explain his name. He shares it with the nationalist president of Serbia, Slobodan Milošević. "I'm a Croat and Roman Catholic. You can ask anyone," he emphasizes. The garrison has undermined not only the economy, but this man's sense of self. "Maybe now, with the war, I will have to change my name."

Milošević drives from one ruined neighborhood to another, narrating the city like someone who speaks both the language of tourism and the revived dialect of the fort. "When they were up in the hills, the Chetniks enjoyed killing with knives," he says, using the word for irregular fighters attached to the Yugoslav army. Then, like a schizophrenic shifting scenes, "I drove Gene Kelly! I drove Alfred Hitchcock! Business was good!" Milošević lingers in his dreamtime, as though tourism were some vanished childhood memory. Then he flips back. "I don't remember what meat tastes like. My family, we eat day-old bread because it's cheaper. Today, after you, I am going to buy a big piece of brisket."

The cab rounds the corner into the old Dubrovnik marina. Before the war, yachts bobbed in the bay. During what used to be called actually existing socialism, the Dalmatian coast was the Yugoslav erogenous zone. Serbian cupidity fell on the area for its history, but also its conspicuous riches. Today the marina is a landscape of burnt walls. Sunken boats have been dredged up and piled about. Barnacles ornament their decks, bullet holes decorate their hulls. "This is nothing," says Milošević, "You should see the villages south of here." Then, the flashback: "Maybe I'll change my name to Gene Kelly!"

THIS SNAPSHOT WAS FOUND IN—ITS OWN?—RUBBLE.

He pauses and points next door to a ghost building. "I ran that café. My parents lived with me. They're in Slovenia now. They haven't seen this yet."

Krilanović kicks at the skull of a cow in what used to be his stable. He leads me to his café. Nothing recognizable remains. Even the toilet had been looted before they threw the match.

Čilipi was a place straight from central Balkan casting. Arrayed on a radial plan spanning out from a central church, the village was full of long stone houses topped by red tile roofs. Tourism had displaced most of a previous agriculture. A folklore museum had been built. On Sundays, performers decked out in traditional dress played music and danced on the church square.

Out of 184 houses, says Krilanović, 167 had been firebombed. The village, perhaps 20 acres, is empty of people. Roofless houses resemble open crypts. Walking through the rubble, you sense the *Unheimlich*, "the uncanny." After all, the uncanny derives from death. The place is neither grotesque nor fantastic. It does not present a scene of horror. It's closer to sinister dread. Cyrillic grathti, the signature of the Serbian firebombers, intensifies the anxiety. On the church steeple, one of the only things intact: "God protects the Serbs."

The Serbs had singled out Krilanović's place for the phosphorus treatment. Powdered phosphorus is the napalm of architecture. Mere fire blackens a stone wall, but phosphorus burns white hot, cracking and disintegrating the stone. Afterward you can pick a wall apart with your hands. The Serbs used phosphorus on cultural outposts, like the folklore museum, and anything that made money for the locals, like Krilanović's café. A burnt stone wall can be cleaned and reused; after phosphorus, you have to cut away half the stone. Usually there's not enough left to make a secure wall, and the structure has to come down.

Krilanović seems to be a person standing against the flood of common sense. "Come back in a few years," he says implausibly, "and we'll have everything back. You can have a coffee in my place."

The ultimate effect of the garrison is to force otherness back into the heart of everyday life. The poultices will come down and the tourist economy may someday revive. But the abjection will be impossible to erase.

The idea of rubble probably never occurred to the little girl whose picture I found in a pile of broken stone on a 700-year-old street. Her image peered out from between shards of tile and broken marble bits. When I dusted it off I saw a child standing beneath a huge rosette, framed by ornamental stonework, looking away from the camera.

Found photographs carry whatever meaning we project onto them: I read the girl's gaze as quizzical, an embodiment of the future imperfect. Her look was not yet in the shadow of the parapet, not aware of the missiles on the way here. It did not

To walk around Dubrovnik feels like reconnoitering the inside of someone's body. Modern cities are built for traffic; their quadrilateral layout and linear boulevards pump it in and drain it out as quickly as possible. But the plazas and narrow footpaths of a medieval city break up the flow of commerce. There is a sense of enclosure. You feel like a corpuscle negotiating a capillary. It's little surprise that people here describe their hometown as "wounded."

The corporal metaphor extends even to the architecture. In this region, there is a traditional shopfront entrance called *na koljeno*, meaning "at the knee." The door and window, in the shape of an inverted "L," form a low counter giving onto the street. Many of these 400-year-old facades on the main street, or Stradun, are ruined, the limestone blasted open by shrapnel. The white beneath the patina looks like hard cheese. At least half the storefronts have been boarded up, and people have painted ersatz murals on the wood. One is a rendering of bombs flying. Another depicts St. Blaise cradling a model of the city in flames. In Dalmatia, the town is a burning body held in the hands. But the true architectural measure of the war, if such a gauge can be applied, lies south of here.

Fifteen minutes down the coast, south of Dubrovnik, Pero Krilanović is shoveling out blackened tiles from the floor of his living room in a village called Čilipi. His manner is stunned, but strangely buoyant. It's as though he had awakened and found his address moved to another world. The Serbs occupied this area for a year. On the way out, they razed everything.

A site, a pile of materials, an architecture: the built world appears out of the otherness of disorder. The war has hurled Čilipi back into the disarticulation from which it emerged.